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SPACE ADVENTURES

SPRING
1971 • No. 13
60¢

GIANT OF GANYMEDE
by ROSS ROCKLYNNE

SIGNAL POINT IN SPACE
by CHARLES RECOUR

SON OF THE BLACK CHALICE
by MILTON LESSER

SATELLITE SECRET
by KRIS NEVILLE

THE LAUGHING DEATH
by ALEXANDER BLADE

ONE OF OUR PLANETS IS MISSING
by MACK REYNOLDS

PLANET OF LOST MEN
by P. F. COSTELLO

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PIONEER TO VENUS *By Salem Lane*

GRATEFULLY, Jerry Lennon felt the clutch of acceleration taking hold. The weeks of weightless nausea were over, the sickening, soul-wrenching absence of gravity was going. The decelerating rockets of the Venusian-bound *Stellar IV* were operating.

Nobody in the cramped little cabin spoke. Each was occupied with his thoughts. Jerry glanced at Fehler, the powerfully-built ex-boxer. What was going on in his mind? But he didn't ask. Privacy was respected, even the privacy of keeping quiet and thinking to yourself.

Jerry stretched back on the metal-framed bunk. His cramped stomach muscles gradually relaxed as the acceleration increased. He knew they'd keep it at one grav until the landing. Abruptly, Olsen in the lower bunk sat up. He glanced at his wrist watch.

"Four hours to go," he said to no one in particular.

"I wonder what it's like," Jerry said, Nobody answered, so he kept quiet.

He'd had momentary pangs of hesitancy all through the trip, from take-off that cold February morning until now. Why had he left that soft job, he asked himself, to settle in what the books called "the God-forsaken stink that is Venus?" He wasn't really the adventurous type—but then he wasn't an adventurer—he was a pioneer!

The videos he'd seen of Venus had attracted him all right. There men were building a world! Jerry laughed half-aloud when he thought how dramatic the phrase sounded.

"What's the matter, kid?" Olsen asked suddenly.

"Nothing," Jerry answered, "I was just thinking."

"Well don't think too hard, kid. You're gonna work."

Jerry didn't reply. He knew he was going to work. Didn't his file state "electronician, first class?" Didn't he know servomechanisms and remote controls like his own name? They needed mechanics of all kinds in the Colonies. Venus City was blossoming fast.

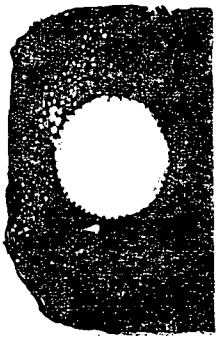
They went through the jarring of the landing, not so different from the take-off, and when the shock subsided, Jerry sensed the motionlessness of the rocket. He was on Venus! The communicator barked suddenly, its tinny voice filling the room with harsh sound:

"...Occupants of all cabins, eight through twenty...attention...gather all personal gear...stow in bag and carry to *landing exit port...you will follow* assigned guards to sleeping barracks for assignments, immunization, and general orientation tomorrow...."

Jerry was as quick as his room companions, and they were all through the door into the corridor, narrow and pipe-filled. Stooping and grunting, they joined other groups walking toward the exit ports. Jerry couldn't refrain from one last glance at the little cubicle which had housed them through the trip. In a way, he thought, it was funny: they hadn't left that space once, till now.

Through the open port, Jerry could see a brilliant light, obviously the landing lights. Overpoweringly strong, an odor was sweeping into the ship, along the corridor. It was less an odor, than a stench, a stench compounded of fish and the sea, and fertility and decay. It was rank and malodorous, sweeping brinily and headily into your nostrils. Jerry knew that this was the "Venusian smell"—at least the old-timers called it that.

And then he was swept in the pressing group to the debarkation ramp. He got his first glimpse of Venus.



But he didn't see much.

Everywhere, there was confusion and noise, the shouting of orders, the clang of metal, the flicker of lights and torches. It was orderly confusion.

As Jerry walked down the ramp toward the long low buildings which were the barracks and which would be his first home on Venus, he looked back again at the towering symbol of the rocket. The Venusian night was damp and warm and dark, the odor was everywhere and the rocket seemed to blend in with the background. Just for a minute he felt a pang of homesickness, a tiny twinge of fear—and then it was gone. Resolutely he turned his head away and marched with the group. He was a pioneer. He was a Venusian colonist. He was going to build a world...

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IMAGINATIVE TALES ON OTHER PLANETS

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Front cover painting by Lawrence, illustrating a scene from the story "Son of the Black Chalice"

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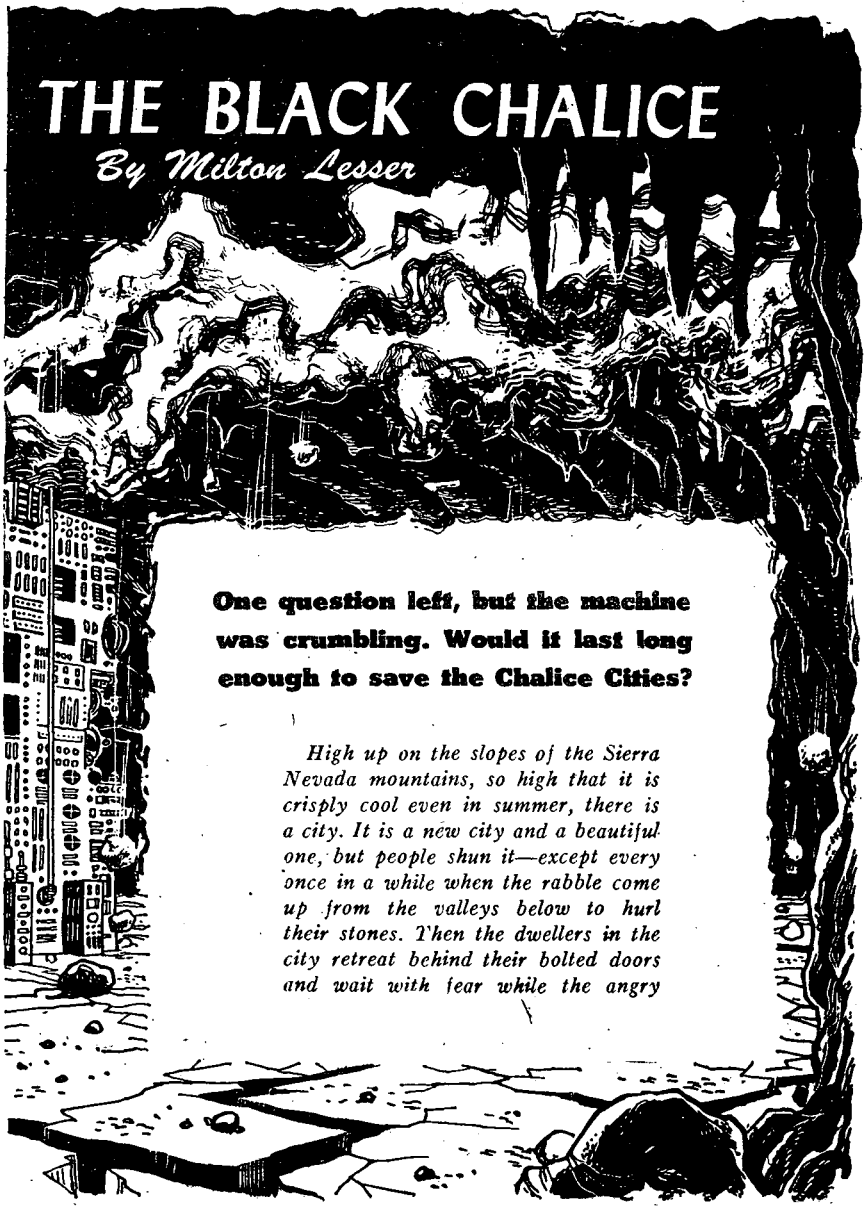
THE BLACK CHALICE

By Milton Lesser



One question left, but the machine was crumbling. Would it last long enough to save the Chalice Cities?

High up on the slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains, so high that it is crisply cool even in summer, there is a city. It is a new city and a beautiful one, but people shun it—except every once in a while when the rabble come up from the valleys below to hurl their stones. Then the dwellers in the city retreat behind their bolted doors and wait with fear while the angry

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mobs start the long trek down and back to their valleys. The dwellers in the city have learned to live with fear, for they are Children of the Chalice.

There is on Venus also such a city, and one on Mars. There are hamlets for the Children of the Chalice on the Jovian Moons. But not all of the Children live in the recommended places....

"I SEE HER, Mark. Oh, Mark, here comes Susan!"

The woman, whose name was Hannah Bentley, stood shivering near the window, squinting out into the gathering gloom. Night on Mars carries on its quick black wings a terrible cold, even in Syrtis Major City, the capital.

"Then come away from the window," Mark Bentley told his wife. "If you stay, Susan will know you were watching, and she'll know you were worried."

"Who's worried? Susan can take care of herself, Mark Bentley!"

"You're worried. Now come away from that window."

Hannah Bentley backed away from the thick glass, and then they could hear Susan inserting her key in the lock. A blast of frigid air swept in with Susan from the cold streets outside and the girl had to lean all her weight against the door to shut it.

"Hul-lo," she said, unzipping her furs.

"Her eye, Mark! Look at her eye! The poor thing—"

"I'm all right." Susan eluded her mother's embrace. "I just got into a fight, that's all."

"Your eye is blackened."

"Well, you should see them. Two of them, two boys. I won, Mama."

Mark Bentley nodded. "Of course you won. You're of the Chalice."

"But it isn't right, Mark. It isn't right that an eighteen-year-old girl should have to fight like a boy."

"She's of the Chalice." He always said it like that, Hannah Bentley knew, as if it were the answer to everything.

Susan blew on her hands to warm them. She had long and graceful hands, and they were like the rest of her. Tall and lithe, blossoming only recently into young womanhood. She was beautiful, and her mother had never been anything but plain. Her father was big and work-hardened, but homely. Perhaps the Chalice was responsible for that, too, for Susan Bentley's beauty.

"I don't care, Mark. Susan is a woman now and if that has to happen every time she goes off to visit a friend on the other side of town—"

"What can we do?"

"We can move out of Syrtis Major, that's what. To one of the Chalice Cities, where we belong."

"What? Segregated like that as if—as if we weren't human! Now you, Hannah, you're human...."

"So are you, Mark! You and Susan. Probably, you're more than human. But people don't understand that."

"They hate us!" Susan cried. "They hate us because we're better than they are. We're stronger and we live longer and we don't get hurt much and, if we're second generation, we're beautiful. Well, I hate them too."

"You mustn't say that, child."

"I can say what I want, I'm not a child any more. I hate them!"

* * *

JOHN HASTINGS knew that, twenty-five years before, his father had walked this same path. His father,

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the first John Hastings, had blasted down upon the Black Asteroid, had been amazed that the place had air and warmth and Earth-normal gravity. Nor had he known that the Chalice awaited him—awaited his coming for countless eons—deep within the bowels of the artificial world.

John Hastings, the son, knew what to expect. But even then, his journey had been a dangerous one. Half the Solar System's military might was clustered in space around the black globe but, miraculously, he'd slipped through the circle of steel and flame. His feet click-clacked briskly on the smooth, hard surface, and he felt a wild triumph welling up within him.

The Black Asteroid! And the Chalice. . . .

He found the door, marked off in phosphorescent white; he fingered the stud of smooth rock and then he pressed it.

Silence for the space of two heartbeats. Then a vague grinding sound, as some hidden mechanism deep within the small world began to function. In a moment, the door slid back. John Hastings walked down the stairs slowly, almost reverently. This was the place. It was here that he had received his birthright, and although the people hated him and his kind, he knew he was more than human. In that knowledge was a certain comfort, for he realized that the first true man must have been shunned and hated like this by his gnarled, hairy fellows.

The utter silence of deep space entered the crypt with him. Nothing stirred. Nothing moved. But the wall glowed with an unknown source of light, and in the center of the room stood the Chalice.

It wasn't black, not really. Only the artifcial world was black, and from that the Chalice had received its name. It did not matter. Not even the Chalice mattered. John Hastings sought what lay beyond the Chalice —if anything.

If anything—

There had to be something! He'd gambled his life on that, and ultimately, he knew, the life of his kind might depend on what he found.

On the walls he could see the ancient murals which some said had been painted there before the coming of man. Yet the murals showed men and the men stood near a spaceship—and there were men of Venus and Mars as well as of the Earth. Then, long ago—before the fifth planet had burst asunder to form the asteroid belt—the murals had been painted, but by whom? By other men, or so the theories said, by other men who had come before us and planted the seed for us and then departed.

And surely they must have left something behind with which to reap the harvest!

John Hastings looked, and found—nothing. There was the Chalice and the bank upon bank of machinery which yielded power to it. There were the murals and there was the silence. But that was all. Nothing else. The murals were vivid. Over the ages their coloring somehow had not faded, and they were truly tri-dimensional, although when he ran his hand over them, he found the surface flat.

But nothing else. . . .

Wearily, he trudged back toward the stairway. His right foot was on the first step when something jarred the small world.

John Hastings stumbled, fell to hands and knees. When he got to his feet he knew that another spaceship had landed on the Black Asteroid, and he did not have to stretch his

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imagination to suspect that those within it were hostile.

He eased a blaster from its pouch, crept slowly up the stairs. There were nine of them, he knew. His father had said that nine steps led down to the Chalice. Footsteps struck sharply against the stone, the sound of many men running.

John Hastings peered out. Instantly, something streaked by his head and formed a trickle of melted rock behind him. He ducked quickly back into the crypt, heard a harsh voice:

"Come out of there! Come on out of there or we'll come in after you!"

* * *

"WHAT DO you think you're doing, Susan?"

"You can see for yourself. I'm packing."

"Your father wants to stay here in Syrtis Major. He wants us to stay with him."

"We don't belong in Syrtis Major, Dad and me. You—"

"Oh, then you think I belong. I'm not one of you. Well, I'm not. But I love you, Susan, and I'm your mother."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. Dad can stay if he wants. You *should* stay, you wouldn't like it living among the Children. But I'm getting out."

"Susan."

"I'm a woman now. You said so yourself. I want to go where I can be happy. I can't be happy here."

Susan snapped her valise shut with finality. "They hate me," she said. "So I guess I've learned to hate them back. Tell Dad—I didn't want to say goodbye to him. You worry all the time on the outside, Mama. But he worries inside, and that's worse."

"I'll tell him."

"And I'll write to you, Mama—after I'm settled. I don't know where. Here on Mars maybe, or in the Sierra Nevada Mountains on Earth."

Hannah Bentley said nothing. She crossed the room and embraced her daughter. There was so much she wanted to say, so much that the long, aching years had piled up for her to say. But her tongue felt stiff and swollen and suddenly her mouth was very dry. She watched her daughter leave, then ran to the window and stood there a long time until the fur-garbed figure faded slowly from sight.

It was only then that Hannah Bentley began to cry.

* * *

JOHN HASTINGS crouched at the bottom step. Once a head had appeared briefly above him, but he'd snapped off a quick beam with his blaster, and the head had ducked back out of sight. He couldn't remain in the crypt indefinitely, but he was in no hurry to have them sear him with their weapons. He knew he would take a lot of killing, for a Child of the Chalice did not die easily. But they could hurt him and that was the same thing. He'd be captured and Government would throw the book at him for invading the crypt.

He fired another beam from his blaster to let them know he was still there, then he walked back into the crypt itself. Somewhere in there was a central lighting system for the artificial world, and if he could find that and damage it, he might have a chance to return to his ship in darkness. He knew it was hopeless, however. No one understood the machinery within the crypt, and he might as well be looking for a needle in a haystack on the dark side of Pluto.

After a time he gave it up. The

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banks of machinery were encased completely in smooth, gleaming metal. He could not make head or tail out of them, he was only wasting time. He shrugged, stalked back to the nine stairs.

"Hello out there!"

"We hear you."

"You the police?"

"Damned right. Come on out, wise guy."

"Listen, this crypt is important, isn't it?"

"What do you think?"

"I know it is. Government has decided not to use it any more, but they don't want it destroyed. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'm coming out. But I've set a baby atomic down here," John Hastings lied, "and if you lay a hand on me, I'm going to set it off by remote control. I'll blow this crypt to—"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I? Don't try me."

"We'll blast as soon as you poke your head out."

"All right. Go ahead, blast. But I'm one of the Children, and you know we don't die fast, if at all. I'll be able to set this baby atomic off first."

He didn't wait for an answer, climbing the steps slowly, one at a time. He reached the top step, and no one fired. He could see them now in the dim light, a dozen men, all with their blasters trained on him.

The leader demanded: "How do we know you set that thing like you say?"

"You don't."

"Well, I think maybe we ought to take you—"

John Hastings shrugged, reached into a pocket of his jumper and kept his hand there. "All I have to do is press the button," he said.

He began walking.

They followed him, at a distance. He heard their feet clacking on the hard surface, almost felt their eyes boring into his back. And the blasters. If even one of them became trigger-happy, his ruse wouldn't be worth a damn. And once they started firing he wouldn't have a chance, for the barren sphere offered utterly no protection.

He walked. The asteroid was only half a mile in diameter, and he could see his ship on the ridiculously near horizon. He saw the other ship too, a much larger one, a big, bloated, snub-nosed police cruiser.

He walked.

He reached his ship, heard a voice yelling behind him: "Shoot! Go on, kill the dirty liar! I just went down there, and he didn't plant a thing. Kill him before he gets inside that ship—"

He was all thumbs working on the air-lock lever and the blasters were firing, ripping into the hull and turning it cherry-red where they struck. They'd have the range in a moment—

He stormed inside, slammed the lock shut behind him. He saw them running for their own ship as he blasted off, acceleration pinning him down in his chair. He laughed wildly. Their bodies could not take acceleration the way his could, so let them chase him! He'd blast clear of the ring of ships and show them a few fancy turns that would crush them into bloody, shapeless things.

Now, as the police ship came up after him, he executed one of those turns. The Government cruiser was faster than his over-age scout ship, but it could not match the turn. He watched it streak off at a tangent, and he knew it would be a long time before they could turn and find him again. The acceleration was painful, but harmless—at least to one of the Children.

He knew he could get back to Earth, to his father, to Togoshira

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Suuki, the Japanese-Venusian half-breed who had taught him so much—and to the rest of his people.

But he had found nothing.

CHAPTER II

"HELLO, Suuki. How's the boy?"

"Johnny! You have returned so fast." Suuki was not a boy. He'd been middle-aged when, together with John Hastings, Sr., he'd reached the Black Asteroid. Now he was an old man with dry, parchment-like skin and big round eyes. "And is your news good?"

Johnny shook his head. "No. Nothing, Suuki—there was nothing there."

"Sometimes a man fails to see what was not meant to be obvious...."

"I didn't miss anything. There was nothing to miss. Only the Chalice and that machinery, and the murals on the wall. Those damned murals. How did they know what we'd look like?"

"They planted a seed on the three planets, Johnny. If you place a tree-shrew on the ancient Earth, in the natural course of things a man would develop. A highly advanced biological science could do that."

"Where are they from, Suuki? Where?"

"Ahh—that we do not know! From the stars, Johnny, but there are many stars."

"And an age ago they left the crypt there so we could reach them. Some place there should be the secret of space-travel, interstellar travel. In the crypt, Suuki, only I didn't find it."

"I think you did well. Your examination was thorough, and it proves my point. There's nothing further to be found, nothing at all."

"I don't get it."

"We already have the secret of star-travel, if we could recognize it. That's all I will say, Johnny. Let me think."

"Okay. Hell, I'd better run up the street anyway and say hello to the folks. I'll bet they were worried."

"Worried? Aren't you the son of your father? What do they have to worry about? No, Johnny, they only worry about the future. We all worry about the future, since the Chalice ....but I said I want to think."

Smiling, Johnny left the porch of Togoshira Suuki's neat little cottage and climbed the steep slope toward his folks' house. All the cottages were similar—neat and trim and inexpensive. Some seemed to hang precariously over high embankments, but the whole city had been engineered well, for many of the Children spent their entire lives there. Of all the inhabitants—other than wives or husbands of the new breed—Suuki alone was not of the Children. Yet it was Suuki who had planned the city, and Suuki, along with John Hastings, Sr., who governed the city.

FURTHER up along the slope, Johnny saw a crew of laborers clearing away some debris. Glass sprinkled the rocky road for twenty yards, rocks and timber were strewn everywhere. Half a dozen panting men shoveled the ruined building material into waiting wheelbarrows, and one tall man, broad across the shoulders and thick through the chest, seemed to work harder than the rest.

"I'm back, Pop," Johnny said.

"Son! We didn't expect you for—how did it go?"

"Lousy."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Well, at least you returned safely, and a lot of us doubted you'd do that." John Hastings leaned for a moment on the handle of his shovel. A cool wind swept down from the higher slopes, but he was bare-chested and

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sweating. "They came up from the valley again last night," he said. "More of them than ever before, about a hundred. This time they had guns and a woman was wounded in the shoulder before we could drive them off."

Johnny frowned. "Why don't we fight back, Pop? I mean really fight back. Why don't we go down into the valleys and repay them in kind?"

"You figure it out. The police would love to get something on us, something big like that. The police are no exception—like everyone else, they hate us."

"Well, if the raids keep getting worse, we can't just sit here and take them."

"I don't see there's anything else we can do. The Children have to be careful, Johnny. You know that. We're too strong and we're too healthy—and, yes, we're too good-looking. If we competed, our men would be the finest athletes in the world, and even our women would hold their own with ordinary men. Our women would win all the prizes in all the beauty contests. We're never sick and we don't get tired easily and when we're injured we heal in a matter of hours. So the world is envious.

"Sometimes it backfires. Did you know that no ordinary person wants his sons to be big and strong and handsome, his daughters to be pretty? If they are, they can be mistaken for the Children, and they're liable to be stoned or beaten or worse. Johnny—Johnny! I didn't know I was starting all this twenty-five years ago. I couldn't know. I thought it would do good!"

"It's not your fault, Pop. The government thought it would do good, too. They knew only a small fraction of the population could visit the Chalice every generation, so they started by giving out intelligence tests. The most intelligent people went to the Chalice. And since the mutation bred true, that would give the race increased intelligence for the next generation. Only it didn't work."

"No, it didn't work. The less intelligent members of the race thought they were being gyped out of something they should have had. I don't know, maybe they had a point there. Government next tried the sick people, the mental and physical cripples. But healthy folk hollered bloody murder, they thought they had a right to be more healthy. Pressure groups came next, and a whole series of minor revolutions. But you know all that. Final result: there are one million Children of the Chalice in the Solar System, hated, hunted, feared. . . ."

"If only they could construct more of the Chalices, pop!"

Hastings laughed without mirth. "How? We don't understand the machine at all. If you give a spaceship to a bunch of Venusian aborigines and tell them to duplicate it, they won't know how. It's completely beyond them, because they haven't had the training and the scientific know-how. This is the same thing, only all humanity is your Venusian aborigine."

"Well, I still don't think the government acted wisely, banning the Chalice, yet not destroying it. It's out there in the asteroid belt, and everyone knows it. Hundreds have been killed trying to reach it every year—"

"And there'll be hundreds more. But the government's hands are tied. Don't you see, they can't destroy the Chalice! There's always the hope they'll be able to duplicate it and turn the whole race into supermen. Meanwhile, there are only a million of us, and we're hated."

"Well—"

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"Forget it, Johnny. You must be tired, and your mother will want to see you. Why don't you go on to the house and I'll see you later."

Johnny nodded, climbed on up the road.

* * *

TEN THOUSAND feet below him, in one of the fertile valleys that brushes the lowest slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountains, an angry crowd gathered. There were farmers and there were townspeople, mostly men, but with enough women and older children to keep the mob excited.

"Look up! Go ahead, look up. You can see it shining there, the city they built. High and mighty, snooting down their noses at us!"

"They'll get theirs some day. They'll get it!"

"Why wait for some day? Why not now, tonight? And why don't we give it to them?" The man who spoke brandished a club, and he looked like he knew how to use it.

"Yeah! Tonight—"

"Shh! Hold it. Here comes Bart Timmins; let's let him talk."

Timmins stalked arrogantly through the village square and people moved out of his way. Wrapped around his forehead was a dirty bandage, but he carried it like a badge of honor. His shoulders were massive, he had a barrel-chest, he wore knee-length walking shorts, and his legs below them were gnarled and muscular. His face might have been pleasant in a rough, rugged sort of way, except that he was prone to leer too much.

"Sure, tonight!" he cried, mounting the steps of the Municipal Building. "If we go up in force, we can clean that city out."

"What do you mean, clean it out?"

"I mean mess it up, but good. I mean tear down some houses and maybe hurt some people and take some of their best men prisoner."

"What will we do that for, Mr. Timmins?"

"You afraid, Peters?" Timmins smiled coldly.

"N-no. But what good will it do us?"

"Here's what. If we can hold some hostages, if we can hold enough of them, we can chase the rest of 'em out of our neck of the woods. That is, if they want their friends back alive."

"That ain't legal."

"Is that so? It isn't even nice, my friend, but it will work. Sure, it's not legal, but wake up to the facts of life. Whenever we do something to the Children—" Timmins spat the word —"the police sort of turn their heads the other way. I say tonight, and I say we do all of that."

"You really hate them, don't you Mr. Timmins?"

"What's the matter, don't you?"

"Yeah, but with you it's different."

Timmins growled, told the man to forget it. Then he repeated. "I say tonight! We'll get them good tonight."

The crowd roared, and it was a long time before they quieted down. Then someone demanded: "How will we get there between now and tonight? It's ten thousand feet, almost straight up—"

"I've got a friend," said Timmins, "who owns an airport four, five miles from here. He has a dozen 'copters, enough room for a couple hundred of us. We'll get there, all right. We'll come down about midnight—and we'll be *above* the city." Timmins chuckled

"Above?"

"That's what I said, above. They'll never expect that. they don't guard

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the upper regions. We'll have what we want before they know what hit them."

"I don't think that's such a hot idea," someone said.

It surprised Timmins. He scowled into the crowd, squinting against the strong sunlight. "Who said that?"

"I did." It was a girl. She was tall, as tall as Timmins himself, and quite beautiful. She came forward and the crowd parted for her. She mounted the stairs and stood directly in front of Timmins, hands on hips.

"And who the hell are you?"

"I'm a stranger, Mr. Timmins. Just got here today. But I think your idea stinks."

"Can you suggest a better one?"

"I'm not going to try. I think the whole business, in general, stinks."

"Is that so?" Timmins glared ominously.

"Yes."

THERE WAS a silence. Someone in the crowd coughed and someone else tittered when the girl leered right back at Timmins and did not come off second best. Finally, he said: "What's a pretty girl like you doing traveling by yourself?"

"Nothing. Just traveling."

"Yes? Well, you're pretty enough to be one of the—"

"I never said I wasn't."

Stirring in the crowd, nervous, angry. And Timmins: "Are you?"

"Why don't you figure that out for yourself?"

"Listen, Miss—uh—"

"Bentley. Susan Bentley."

"Okay, Miss Bentley. Okay, Susie! Stop beating around the bush like that, Susie. Are you one of them?"

"I could be, at that, couldn't I? Tell me, Mr. Timmins, do you think I'm pretty enough?"

"Hell, yes. Only you're still hedging."

"I told you to find out for yourself."

"How do you suggest I do that? There's no identifying mark on the Children, although I think there ought to be one. I knew a pretty girl around here who once got beat up good because someone figured she was one of the Children. Turned out she wasn't, but we didn't learn till later."

"There's a way you can find out."

"How?"

"Hit me."

"Huh?"

"I said, hit me. Go ahead, are you afraid? The Children are strong, you know that. One of their men could take care of five or six like you, and even one of their women should be more than a match for you."

"I don't hit ladies."

"You're afraid."

"Listen—"

"You're afraid. If you hit me, and if I hit you back, harder, you wouldn't be such a big hero in front of all these people. Go ahead, hit me."

"Beat it! Scram before I change my mind."

"You're afraid." *Careful, Susan,* the girl thought. *Don't goad him too far, or he's liable to do just that. You're always ornery, and you always have a chip on your shoulder. You shouldn't have come up here and talked like this in the first place, but now that you have, you'd better convince them you're* not *one of the Children. Or else you'll never be able to warn those people in the city....*

Someone in the crowd snickered. Clearly, the girl was making a fool of Timmins. It never took him long to lose his temper, and now he swung his open palm and struck her across the face.

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She stumbled and fell and when she got to her feet again, she was sniffling. "You—hit—me!" she wailed. "You hit me! I'm not one of them, I was only joking...."

She stood there, sniffling.

"Christ, lady, I'm sorry. It's a fool joke for you to pull; how was I to know?"

"Well, I was just joking. I even thought your idea was a good one, but you hit me."

"Christ, lady." Timmins patted her shoulder awkwardly. It failed to stop her sniffling, and everyone was laughing.

"Did you really like my idea?"

"Y-yes. Yes, I did...."

"Well, if you stop crying, and if you promise not to get in the way, we'll take you up to the mountains with us."

"Really?" She stopped her sniffling, stared at him wide-eyed.

"Sure. Sure, lady."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Timmins." No one was close enough to see that Timmin's hand had cut the girl's lip badly. No one was close enough to see that, nor to see that the bleeding had stopped almost at once and that now the cut could not even be seen.

* * *

AFTER coffee, John Hastings leaned back and tamped tobacco into his pipe, lighting it and blowing blue clouds of smoke up at the ceiling. He looked at his son and he saw himself, twenty-five years before. His wife, Ellen, must have seen that, too, for she looked at both of them and smiled.

Togoshira Suuki grinned crookedly. His long white hair was as fine as flax and he let it fall to his shoulders, Venusian Upland fashion. It was the only custom of his ancient people he affected. "We are right back where we started from, are we not?"

"Yeah," Johnny admitted. "I guess so."

Ellen shook her head. Even now, nearing her fiftieth birthday, she was a beautiful woman. Her hair was graying and there were little wrinkles around her eyes and her lips, but still her face was noble enough to belong to one of the Children, although she was a perfectly normal human woman and she had never been within the Chalice. "No, we've learned something. We've learned there's nothing else to be found."

"A lot of good that does us," Johnny told her.

But Suuki grinned again. "Do not be too certain of that. Your mother seems to agree with what I said before—there may be more in what we already know than meets the eye. I am beginning to understand something.... Tell me, Johnny, how did you get away from the police?"

"Why, I told them I had a baby atomic, and—"

"I don't mean that. I mean afterwards."

"I got into my ship and blasted off. I'm one of the Children, so I can take acceleration they can't get near."

"Precisely."

"Precisely?" This was the elder John Hastings. "I don't see what you're driving at, Suuki."

"Nor am I sure that I do. But one of the Children can take a great deal of acceleration. Is that correct?"

"Certainly."

"And we want to go to the stars, is that correct?"

"You're damned right it is!" Johnny cried eagerly. "If we can do that, if we can get out of the solar system and reach the stars, maybe we'll be able to find the earlier race

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of humans who planted the Chalice here. And planted us, too. If they still exist, they've been living with the Chalice a long time, so maybe they'll know what to do about our trouble. *If* we could get to the stars."

"But we can't?"

"No, we can't."

"Why not?" Suuki demanded.

"Oh, we can construct an interstellar drive, all right. We already have it in theory, because Einstein's light-speed maximum doesn't apply when you're dealing with sub-space. But that's not the answer. No human being could survive the acceleration necessary to reach translight speed and, so far, no one can construct anything to ward off that acceleration."

Suuki nodded. "That, I believe, is beyond the powers of any science. It is something which cannot be done."

"Then it's hopeless?"

"I did not say that. The answer has been staring us in the face for so long that we missed it altogether. What's the old expression about not seeing the forest for the trees? Consider: the Children cannot be injured readily. When they are, they heal almost instantly. Have you ever heard of one of the Children being injured *at all* by acceleration?"

"No," Hastings said, and Johnny nodded.

"They aren't, that's why! There's something in the regenerative powers that the Chalice gives you that renders accleration harmless. I'm sure of it. There is pain, yes, there is great pain, but any damage that forced acceleration does to the tissues of the Children is counteracted instantly. Probably, there is constant recreation of the damaged tissue, all the way down to the atomic level."

"Do you really think..." Johnny began, and his mother: "If that's the answer...."

"It is the answer," said Suuki. "I am certain it is. We can construct a starship and the Children can withstand the acceleration. It will merely be necessary, during the brief periods of acceleration and deceleration that bring you into and takes you out of sub-space, to induce slumber. That way pain will be avoided—but we can travel to the stars!"

"To the stars...."

THEY WERE still talking about it, hours later, when someone pounded on their door. Johnny said he would get it, crossing to the door with long-legged strides. He opened it and saw a girl, sweating, dirty, disheveled. She might have been pretty, but under all that grime he couldn't tell.

"I'm looking for John Hastings!"

"Which one? There are two, senior and junior."

"I don't care! Whoever runs this city."

"That would be my father. Hey, Pop!"

"Coming, Johnny—"

"This girl wants to see you."

"Mr. Hastings?" And, when he nodded, it all came out in one gushing torrent: "I was down in the village and a mob decided to attack you up here, only they're going to do it from above you and not below, so I went with them and broke away quick to warn you before they strike."

"Huh? What are you talking about young lady? Attack from above instead of below? Who? What for? You mean one of those mobs of rioters? We meet up with that all the time."

"More than that, Mr. Hastings! It's big this time and they came up in 'copters, and they plan on taking some of you hostages so they can tell the rest to clear out of their part of the country."

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"Who are you, young lady? This all sounds so wild and incredible, an organized attack like that—"

"Please! You haven't time. Do you have soldiers?"

"Of course. But they're guarding the passes leading up from below."

"Turn them around, then. The men of the valley will be attacking from above your city."

"How do we know this isn't a trick?" John Hastings had a point there, his son knew. The villagers had attempted every type of subterfuge in the past. They might—they just might—stoop this low, sending a girl with a message that would leave the passes unguarded.

Wordless, the girl reached into her pocket, withdrew a knife. She pressed the button, watched the blade snap out. Without pausing, she ran the knife across her forearm, wincing as she did so. A trickle of blood started from the cut, then stopped flowing at once. The cut became a thin white line which, even as they looked, disappeared.

"I'm one of the Children," she said. "Susan Bentley. Maybe you knew my father—"

"Mark Bentley? Sure I knew him, years ago. She's legitimate, Johnny."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Johnny was already running outside, calling back over his shoulder: "Get the guard-posts on the phone. Bring them around to the upper slopes. I'm taking a run down there to see that they move fast."

Then he was charging quickly down the hill, without waiting for an answer. In five minutes he reached the first guard-post, not much more than an oversized lean-to set into a niche in the rock, half-hidden by the scrubby trees which clung to the face of the mountain hundreds of feet above the timber line.

"Did you get the call?"

"Sure did. On our way up now—"

And Johnny continued running down the hill.

BY THE time he reached the fourth and final guard-post, he heard the distant sounds of fighting up the slope behind him, the thud-thud-thud of pounding feet, the shout of men in battle, the sibilant hissing of blasters, the occasional flat, cracking sound of an ancient explosive rifle. Two guards were climbing out of their lean-to at the final post, and one of them nodded curtly but eloquently up the slope. "They mean business this time," he said.

Briefly, Johnny was aware that they followed him up the hill, and then he was pounding back the way he had come. As he ran, he saw the lights winking off in the trim little cottages on either side of him. Women and children would be huddling fearfully within their homes, but the men-folk were trotting up the hill in twos and threes, armed for the most part only with crude clubs. None of them spoke; talk was superfluous. Grimly, they climbed the hill.

Johnny unsheathed his blaster as he rounded the last bend in the steep path. He could see dense clouds of smoke rising under the light of the full moon. Three houses in a row had been fired, and the flames darted and licked angrily, fanned by the mountain wind.

One of the houses was his own!

The fighting centered about it, too. The defenders seemed a pitifully thin line, and they were being forced back, too. Physically, man for man, the Children certainly had the edge, and they were not outnumbered. But none of the Children could receive permits for any weapons more potent than explosive rifles. Only a few, like

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Johnny, used unlicensed blasters. And the result was a tremendous deficit in fire-power.

The thin line of defenders crept back toward the three burning houses. There the line held for a moment, while blasting beams seared air all around them and sought them out. Then the line broke. It was inevitable, for the line could not retreat in an orderly fashion, not through the flaming ruins of the three cottages. Instead, the line broke and curled around the flames rapidly. By the time they reached the other side, they were running in confusion, and only an occasional quick volley of rifle fire answered back the steady hissing of the blasters.

Johnny plunged ahead, tried to fill the breech with his own weapon. Heat from the cottage—his own burning home—was intense, but he crouched down a dozen yards behind the stone chimney and fired blindly ahead of him. Once he heard someone scream, and he did not like the sound of a man dying in agony. Still the invaders had come to destroy their homes here in the mountain city....

In the harsh light of the flames, Johnny saw some of the invaders snaking around the cottage and plunging down the hill to left and right of him. He fired once, and then his blaster jammed and he crouched there with it, helplessly. They streamed down the hill on both sides of him, they struck with clubs and threw stones and he could hear glass shattering and women screaming. Sobbing, Johnny stood up, silhouetted briefly against the flames. He drew fire; three beams which soared harmlessly over his head—and then he plunged into one group of the invaders.

He met them with flailing fists, sent four of them reeling with his first onslaught. Oddly, he noted that they no longer made their way down the hill. Instead, the two lines had turned back and in toward the burning houses and now swept up to the very crest of the hill. In his blind fury, Johnny did not realize they could have blasted him down with consummate ease; nor did he have time to ponder why they withdrew.

When the reason did occur to him, it was too late. They ringed him in completely, with his back to the raging flames—and only then did someone fire at him. The blaster caught him squarely in the chest and he tottered for a moment before tumbling forward on his face. He was conscious long enough after that to realize that the beam had been of full intensity and would have destroyed an ordinary man.

But he was one of the Children, and he would survive. In hours, the mechanisms of regeneration within every cell of his body would begin to function and, before the sun rose, he would be good as new. Except that they were taking him with them....

Ten minutes later, the 'copters rose smoothly from their perches further up the mountain. They winged silently into the valley below.

CHAPTER III

"WE'LL BUILD again," John Hastings said wearily, running a hand through his graying hair.

"We'll always build again," someone told him.

"What can we do? Do you think I like it? Do you—they have my son. They have Johnny!"

Susan Bentley tapped his arm, and when he turned around she said: "It's my fault."

"What do you mean, it's your fault? Don't blame yourself, child. If you hadn't warned us there's no telling

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what would have happened. And afterwards you fought like a man—"

"I have always had to fight like a man. But it's my fault. I should have broken away to warn you sooner, but I couldn't."

"Then it's not your fault."

"I knew their raid was aimed at taking a hostage. Someone important. One of them must have recognized Johnny. They've been up here before, haven't they?"

"Of course. And Johnny would venture every now and then down into the valley, anyway. A lot of the Children are bitter, but Johnny's not. He even tried to make friends down in the valley, and there was a girl once—"

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure. He never spoke much about it. He dated her a few times, and a man named Timmins, I think, didn't like it. She was Timmins' girl friend and Johnny took her away from him. They had Johnny in jail on a trumped-up charge for six months. He wouldn't look at the girl after that, but she wouldn't look at this Timmins."

"Oh."

"'Oh', nothing. It still didn't make him bitter. But that's not the point. They can't keep Johnny like that, it's not legal. Anyway, what's their purpose?"

"They're going to issue an ultimatum. If you want your son back alive, you're going to have to leave this city."

"Why me?"

"No, not just you. You don't understand, Mr. Hastings. If you want to see Johnny again, the whole city will have to be evacuated. Permanently."

"What? That's fantastic! I know they don't like us, but what have they got against our city?"

"They're just envious, that's all. They hate us. They always have and they always will. Only now they have a weapon on their side."

"It isn't legal, Susan. They can't kidnap Johnny and—"

"Your son is how old—twenty-three?—well, the government will hardly look on that as kidnapping. First, because even the government doesn't hold any love for the Children, and second because they'll probably shift the blame for the fight on your people."

"All right. We've got to get him back."

"How? By raiding the valley? Then you'll really be in hot water."

"Umm-mm. Well, I'll see the sheriff down in the valley. He isn't a part of it—"

"No, but if he's anything like the law-officers on Mars, he'll shut his eyes every time."

"Well, I've got to try."

"Good luck," Susan said. "You'll need it."

THE SHERIFF lived in a small ranch house at the east end of the valley. He was a tall man and stout. He had a half-smoked cigar clamped between his yellowed teeth, and it looked like it might have been there for days.

"You're a stranger, ain't yuh?" he grunted.

"Yes."

"Where from?"

Hastings pointed up toward the distant mountains.

"One of the Children?"

"Yes."

Another grunt. "Wācha want?"

"My son. There was a raid on our city, and they kidnapped my son, name of John Hastings, same as mine."

"Don't know about that."

"Do you know about the raid?"

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The sheriff yawned hugely. "There's always talk, Mister. I don't know nothing."

"Weren't there some injured men in the valley today?"

"Sure. Always are. Tough breed, all the time fighting. So what?"

"We injured them. They were up in the mountains and—"

"Oh, then you admit it? You attacked the villagers, eh? I didn't get no complaints, mind you, Mister, I didn't get none. But if I do, I'll know where to go, because you admitted it."

Hastings shrugged. "If there was a raid, would you know who'd be in charge?"

"Beats me. The whole thing, I mean. I don't know of any raid, Mister. Maybe you better go climb your mountain and stay put up there."

"Thanks," John Hastings said. "You've been a great help."

The sheriff lit his cigar. "Don't mention it."

* * *

TIMMINS strutted about the room like a rooster. "We got 'em now, men! Oh, we got 'em good. They'll have to clear out if they know what's good for them."

"I hope so," a little man chuckled. "That'll be just fine. Say, did anyone see about that young feller?" He shook his head sadly. "Hurt bad."

"Him?" Timmins laughed. "Hurt bad? I guess you don't know the Children too well. Nothing like that can hurt 'em for long. They heal, Marty. They heal quick. They're inhuman, that's what. Well, okay, let's go take a look."

Timmins strode off into a hallway, reached a door, opened it. The man named Marty gasped. "He's sitting up!"

"Sure he is. How do you feel, Hastings?"

"I'm fine," Johnny said.

"We shot him clear through the chest...." This was Marty.

"Sure," Timmins leered. "Only he healed. They always healed, every time I saw it happen. What's left of your wound, Hastings?"

"I don't know," Johnny told him. "A little white scar, I guess. I haven't looked."

Johnny smiled when the man named Marty unbuttoned his shirt and peered at his chest. "Christ, yeah," he said. "Just a little white scar!"

"See?" Timmins was laughing. Something about it struck him very funny, and he didn't stop laughing for a long time.

Abruptly, Johnny stood up. "I remember you, Timmins. We had a little trouble once—but that's not why you've taken me. What do you want me for?"

"You'll find out. We're going to bargain with your people. If they leave that city of theirs, we'll let you go. If they don't, in a certain amount of time—well, you figure it out."

"Do you think they'll sacrifice their whole city, just for me? Where would they go?"

"That isn't my problem. And to answer your first question, they better."

"You're insane!" Johnny took a quick step toward the thick-chested man, but Timmins pulled out a blaster and motioned him back. "Take it easy. You're liable to be here a long time, and we don't want to keep shooting you up and watching you heal again."

"IT CAME," John Hastings said. Ellen peered over her husband's shoulder, and Susan was there too.

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Togoshira Suuki sat off at the far end of the room—the living room of his own cottage, where the Hastings had come to live since the burning.

Hastings read: "As you know, we have John Hastings, Jr., a prisoner. If you agree to evacuate your city, permanently, we won't harm him. If you don't, we can't be responsible. You have two weeks to decide, and we want your answer not in words, but in action."

It wasn't signed.

"Could you go to the police with that?" Ellen demanded. "It proves they took Johnny—"

Hastings frowned. "They're too smart for that. It doesn't prove a thing. There's no signature, it's just a plain piece of paper and an ordinary typewriter. We could have forged the whole thing."

"Anyway," said Susan, "the law won't help. You found that out when you visited the sheriff, didn't you Mr. Hastings?"

"Yes. I did, but that leaves us with nothing."

Suuki stretched his small, thin body. "There are always means to an end, John. The trouble now is that you have been considering nothing but this problem ever since it happened, and you've lost all perspective."

"Hell, maybe you have something there," Hastings admitted, smiling in spite of himself. "Still, Johnny's my boy—"

"And we all want to get him back. The first thing you must concede, however, is that your son can take care of himself. It is not quite so urgent as you indicate. Now let's forget it completely, at least for a few minutes. I have something important to tell you, John."

"Go ahead." But, clearly, Hastings wasn't very interested.

"Johnny's visit to the Black Asteroid was the final proof I needed. There is nothing necessary for interstellar travel beyond the Children themselves. Theoretically, we should be able to take a spaceship from space to sub-space, and although the acceleration would kill an ordinary man, it would not harm one of the Children provided he had been put into a deep, hypnotic sleep. We still have your old ship up on the higher slopes, John. I should like your permission to convert it to the first interstellar spaceship."

Hastings almost jumped from his chair. "Why didn't you tell me? Of course you have my permission! Star-travel, that's what we've wanted all along. If we could find the race of pre-humans who put that Chalice out there, and—"

"There's still Johnny," Ellen reminded him.

"Yes." Hastings sobered quickly. "Well, I could take this above the sheriff's head and go to higher authorities."

Susan shook her head. "It wouldn't do any good."

And Suuki: "The young lady is right."

"Okay. Then we can mass ourselves in force and attack the valley. We can pay them back in kind and see what happens—"

"No." Suuki was quite firm. "If you did that and didn't find Johnny, they would kill him. Further, the law would then have an excuse to sanction what those of the valleys desire. . . ."

"I think I have an idea," Susan said. "Look: when I went up by 'copter with the people of the valley, they didn't know I was one of the Children. They still don't. They had casualties up here, we buried three of their dead. I sneaked away and

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warned you in the darkness, but they didn't know that. Instead, they probably think it was four dead, not three. Okay so far?"

"You bet. Let's hear more."

"Well, there isn't much. I can go down into the valley and see if I can find Johnny, that's all. They won't suspect me, they will suspect anyone else. I'll leave in the morning."

"We can't ask you to do something like that. There'd be danger, and Johnny isn't your responsibility. No—"

"That's ridiculous. He's one of the Children, so am I. If we don't help each other..."

Susan stood there, hands on hips. She didn't look like she'd take no for an answer.

Suuki grinned. "Let her go, John. I think she can help."

Ellen came to Susan, took her hand and squeezed it. "I don't want anything to happen to you," she said. "But if you can help Johnny—"

"I can help him, Mrs. Hastings. I *want* to help him."

And Suuki chuckled, "Maybe by the time Johnny comes back, I'll have that interstellar ship ready. It's a long way to the stars, John, but we can make it."

FIVE THOUSAND feet below *Paseo Diablo*—the Walk of the Devil—lay the town which received its name from the pass high above it. And now Susan Bentley walked boldly down Paseo Diablo's main street, looking for a familiar face. She was tired and her clothes were in tatters, for although the Children had seen her down as far as the mountain pass, she had gone on from there alone and on foot. She looked the part of a wanderer now, she looked as if she had been lost and had struggled down the steep slopes to the valley.

No one stared at her twice in the bright sunshine. Her beauty would have set her apart, but the dirt and the grime covered it, and her identity as one of the Children was, at least for the moment, perfectly concealed.

Bart Timmins saw her before she saw him. Coming out of the general store with a sack of supplies, he squinted down the street and started running. "Susie!" he cried. "You're Susan Bentley."

Susan smiled weakly. "Hello, Mr. Timmins. I—I never thought I'd make it down to the valley."

"*You* didn't think so? *We* thought you were dead. And I held myself personally responsible. I never should have allowed a delicate thing like you to go up into the hills with us."

"It doesn't matter."

"Umm-mm, yes. You're safe now."

"You see, I got lost in all that fighting, and next thing I knew, I was stuck in—in that city. It was dark and I sneaked out along one of the streets until I came to a mountain trail. I started down, but I guess it took longer than I thought. I—haven't eaten—"

And Susan began to slump forward. In truth, she felt fine. She'd had a hearty meal before leaving the city, and her amazing powers of regeneration had compensated for the wearying trek down the face of the mountain. But she'd never let Bart Timmins know that. She raised a hand half way to her head, moaned a little, and slumped forward.

Timmins reached her in two quick strides and got his hands under her arms as she fell. He lifted her easily and, cradling her in his arms, walked toward his house, two streets away. Walking thus, he looked down at her. A lovely girl, more beautiful than any in Paseo Diablo, beautiful enough to

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be one of the Children. But that was ridiculous and he knew it: one of the Children did not faint from over-exertion!

The girl had short-cropped, curly auburn hair. Her skin was clear and white and, despite her exhaustion, he saw a rosy glow in her cheeks. Her lips were sensuous and appealing without lip rouge; Timmins suddenly found himself thinking it would be very nice indeed to kiss her. Well, that could come later. He was pleased too with the up-tilted swell of her breasts under the thin, tattered jumper, and the feel of her legs, cradled over his left arm as he carried her, was pleasant.

Once he leaned down to brush his lips experimentally across her face, but at that moment she stirred restlessly, squirmed, sighed, and half-opened her eyes.

"You take it easy, kid," Timmins said, breathing hard. "Bart will take care of you."

HE CARRIED her that way to his house and, inside, deposited her on a sofa. Returning from the bathroom, he bathed her face with a cold wet cloth and presently she was sitting up.

"Where am I?" she said, smiling vaguely. *That pig, if he tries to touch me again. I only hope I can hold my temper....*

"Don't you worry, honey. I brought you home, and first thing I'm going to do is give you some good food. I'll bet you need it."

"I'll say," Susan told him, flashing a smile. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't found me."

"Well, I did, so stop your worrying."

"Did you carry me all the way?"

"Sure."

"My, you must be *strong!*"

"Well, shucks—"

"Yes, you must. Whenever there's something to be done in this town, I'd bet you take it over."

"Well, not everything, Susie. But then, if a man's born a leader, then he's a leader, I always say."

"Like that time we went up the mountain, is that what you mean? You were the leader then. Oh, I'm sure you did a good job."

"Well, we accomplished what we set out for."

"Me, I never did find out what that was. I had to get lost. I hope I didn't get in the way up there or anything."

"Naw! Not at all, Susie. And I'm sure glad you're safe."

"That plan you mentioned when I came into Paseo Diablo for the first time, were you able to carry it out? My guess is you were: if you start out to do something, Mr. Timmins, then you do it. That's the kind of man you are."

"As a matter of fact, we *were* successful, honey. We got our hostage, and everything's going according to plan."

"Really? What does he look like? He must be horrible, one of those Children."

"It's all according to what you think—say! I can show him to you if you want." Timmins' craggy features were screwed into a little-boy grin. "Do you want to see my hostage, Susie?"

"Oh—I'd be afraid! Unless, unless—"

"What? Go ahead, say it."

"Unless I was sure you could protect me."

"Sure, Susie. I can protect you. I'll be right there. Want to take a look-see?"

Susan stood up, stretched, smoothed out her tattered jumper. She weaved groggily, leaned against Timmins'

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broad chest and cuddled there for a moment. "That feels good," she said, "because you're so strong."

He stroked her hair, said: "You must be tired. Maybe you'd like to rest first."

"No. No thanks. I am interested, and as long as you're there with me—"

Beaming, Bart Timmins led her from the room and down the flight of steps to the basement.

* * *

JOHNNY had studied his cell until he knew every inch of it by heart. Ten feet long, twelve feet wide, a window high up on one wall, out of his reach. A door, locked from the outside. Cement floor and cement walls, a cot, a chair, a wash-stall. Quite an effective prison, without any possibility of escape.

He wondered if the Children had received Timmins' message. It didn't really matter, he told himself over and over again—no matter what happened to him, they would not give up their city. They couldn't, for then they'd have no place else to live. He only hoped they wouldn't try anything foolish. Even a small-scale raid on Paseo Diablo by the Children would be a valid excuse for the law to step in, and then there'd be no telling what might happen....

Suddenly, so suddenly that it startled him, Johnny heard a key grating in the lock. An instant later, the door swung in, and as he stood up to face it Johnny saw Bart Timmins, a blaster in his hands. But behind him was the girl who had warned them—what was her name? Susan Bentley. Then had she, after all, been a Judas? But no, that didn't make sense, and now he could see her cautioning him to silence from behind Timmins' shoulder. Probably she did not want him to show any recognition. Well, until he found out what was happening, he'd play the game her way.

"Visitor for you," Timmins leered. "Just sit right where you are, Hastings. I don't want you to scare her, see?"

"Okay, I'm not moving."

"She almost got killed in your lousy city, Hastings. Got lost up in the mountains, had to find her way down all by herself."

"He doesn't look so terrible," Susan said. "Can I go closer and look?"

Timmins shrugged. "Okay, but be careful. You never know what one of them is liable to do. Heck, you won't see anything so strange, anyway—*they look human, the Children do.*"

"Well, I want to see for myself." And moving slowly, Susan came toward Johnny. Finally, she stood not a yard away from him, facing him directly so that Timmins could not see her face.

"Careful," Timmins warned. "Careful."

Then Susan's lips were moving, and Johnny watched. At first he didn't get it, but he knew she was forming two words again and again, silently, using only her lips. Finally, it made sense.

Grab me. Grab me.

Johnny did, in one darting motion. He grasped her shoulders, spun her around, circled her neck with his arm. She began to whimper, struggling futily against his hold.

"Damn you!" Timmins screamed. "Leave her alone."

Susan gurgled.

"I won't hurt her," Johnny said. "But I'm walking out of here with her in front of me. You won't dare shoot.

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You go first, Timmins. Come on, move. We'll follow you up the stairs."

Timmins made a lewd gesture. "I'm not budging. I know you, Hastings, you won't stand there and strangle the girl. Sort of an impasse, hunh?"

It was, and Johnny knew it. Timmins had called his bluff, and he stood there, helplessly. An impasse for the moment, but unless Johnny could think of something, Timmins wouldn't leave it that way long.

Timmins took a step toward them, the blaster raised. "I'm coming for you, Hastings. Why don't you just leave the girl alone and sit down? I'll forget all about what you tried." Timmins took another step forward.

Backing away, Johnny pulled Susan with him. Now what?

Closer came Timmins, and Johnny found himself backed into a corner. His hold on Susan was a loose one, although he hoped it looked like he was half-strangling the girl. One way or the other, it didn't matter. Timmins would have him again in a moment. Then the girl had made a game try, he realized hopelessly, but it had come to nothing.

And then Timmins had reached them, wrapping his free arm around the girl's waist and tugging at her. She screamed, "Let me go! Someone let me go. You'll rip me in half—"

Johnny got the idea. It was meant for him. *Let her go....*

Abruptly, he released her, but Timmins continued pulling. She leaped from Johnny's arms like an arrow from a bowstring, plummeting across the room. Timmins was in front of her, facing her, and stumbling backward before her hurtling form—she was screaming and clawing at him all the time, as if she were hysterical—he collided with the far wall and landed in a heap on the floor.

Susan fell on top of him, but she heard Johnny below, and wisely she got out of the way, rolling over and over. She stopped rolling and turned in time to see Johnny cuffing Timmins quite soundly. It wasn't much of a fight. Soon Johnny climbed to his feet, the blaster in his hand. "We're getting out of here," he said.

"Damn you," Timmins cried. "Escape, go ahead, escape! But leave that girl alone."

Johnny found a coil of rope off in a darkened section of the basement. With this he bound Timmins hand and foot, stuffing a handkerchief in the man's mouth for a gag. Without saying anything, he ushered Susan from the room.

And, once they were outside: "My gosh, Susan, he still thinks you were on his side."

"Sure," she smiled. "I couldn't help it if when you let me go I happened to fall all over him. But let's get out of here."

"Yeah," Johnny said. "It's a long way up the mountain."

CHAPTER IV

"THIS IS the ship," Suuki told them proudly.

They stood shivering on the higher slopes above the Chalice City, where now, even in summer, snow and ice clung to the permanent zones of shadow between upthrust crags and pinnacles.

"I still don't see how you got away," John Hastings told his son. "It was a week ago, but no one really told me."

"I guess we didn't feel much like talking," Susan admitted.

"She fooled them, pop. You know that part. Afterwards, well, it was a long way up the mountain, and for a

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time it looked like we wouldn't make it; especially when we had to spend hours in hiding because a fleet of 'copters came looking for us." Johnny shook his head. "They have a lot of power down there in the valley. And I don't think we've seen the last of it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Bart Timmins is going to be good and angry. I mean that he's going to yell and holler until he brings the townspeople back up into the mountains, and then there's going to be hell to pay."

Suuki chuckled. "Well, you won't be here then."

"I don't like it, Suuki. I don't like leaving all of you like this, when anything is likely to happen. I'll be gone a long time, we can't tell how long, but if I stayed I might be able to help."

"Anyone can do your work here," Suuki told him. "But what's one fighting man more or less? You'll be doing more important things."

Susan squeezed his hand impulsively. "Yes, Johnny. Think of it—you'll be the first man to leave the Solar System behind you and head out for the stars!"

"Actually," Suuki continued, "it might turn out to be a hopeless quest. Whoever the first humans were who planted the seed for us here in the Solar System, now they could be anywhere. Provided they still exist. It's as sensible to assume that some place in the long passage of time they faded away—or else went so far you'll never be able to find them."

"As it is—" this was the elder John Hastings—"you'll have a mighty hard job on your hands, son. The sky is full of stars—I know it sounds foolish saying it that way—but the sky is full. We don't know which one. We have no way to find out. It could be any one of them, or the whole thing might turn out to be the greatest wild goose chase a man ever went on; you may find nothing out there but a lot of empty space and a lot of bright stars."

"It is our hope," Suuki went on for him, "that it won't be as bad as all that. If the old race planted the seed for us here, it is logical to assume that they planted the same seed elsewhere. Theory has it that many stars —perhaps one in three—are gifted with planetary families. Very well, a good number of those might have planets suitable for human habitation. It is our hope that on some of them the seed has been planted, as it has been planted in our own Solar System. That way, you may have a trail to follow."

"The first man to leave the Solar System," Susan mused. "I envy you, Johnny. How I wish I could go along—"

SUUKI smiled at her. "Many people do. But no, child. Only one will go. It works in theory, but it may not work in fact at all, and we will try it with one first. If Johnny can accelerate to faster than light speed, if he can find what we seek, if he can come back with his report, then there will be time to think of others going. But not until then."

The elder John Hastings frowned. "Are you trying to say it might be dangerous, Suuki? I wouldn't want Johnny blasting off like this, not if the odds are stacked against him...."

"I don't know. I simply do not know. In theory, it should not be dangerous. But one never knows how the theory fits the fact."

"Granted. But why Johnny? Why must he be the one?"

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"Because I want to go, that's why! I'm your son, and you were the finder of the Chalice. It's only right that I go—"

"That's childish," Suuki said. "Nevertheless, there is a good reason, John, although it is not what Johnny says. He has recently returned from the Chalice. He has seen it firsthand within the last few weeks, and that's more than can be said for anyone else here. He must take that knowledge of the Chalice out to the stars with him. No, there is no need for debate here: I would say Johnny is the man for the job."

And so it was agreed, but after a time John Hastings grinned ruefully. "You know, I kind of pictured the first interstellar ship as a huge, sleek thing which would make the modern planetary liners look like grubby midgets. Here it's the other way around."

The ship was a hundred-footer, a twenty-five-year-old vessel, the hull of which was liberally sprinkled with vacuum-patches. It wasn't very imposing and it looked like it might be able to bumble its way along through the void perhaps as far as Mars, provided full thrust were not employed. Instead, it would try to reach the stars. . . .

"I admit it is no beauty," declared Suuki. "But it will run better than the appearance indicates. We couldn't afford a new ship, but we could afford a new engine: she has power, John. She should be able to reach light speed in a day, and then there are arrangements for Johnny to sleep, for, with the passing of light speed, the ship should automatically shift into sub-space and there the acceleration will be tremendous. I don't think Johnny will particularly enjoy his ride, but the ship should take him where he wants to go."

John Hastings nodded. "Then it is tomorrow. Tomorrow at dawn. Well, son, you'd better get along home and have a good meal and a night's sleep. I have a hunch you'll need both."

JOHNNY stood in the airlock as the first rose-tints of dawn caressed the eastern peaks, promising a fine day. During the night they had crammed the small ship with supplies, with food, with clothing for all types of climate, with records describing man's achievements here in the Solar System, with an arsenal of weapons and ammunition—"just in case", as Suuki had explained.

"Well—" Johnny said, clearing his throat. He felt an unfamiliar thumping in his chest, a wild beating of his heart. He was on the brink of infinity and he knew it.

"Good luck," someone said, and then the whole crowd of them were roaring, "Good luck, good luck. . . ."

Suuki took his hand and pumped it up and down vigorously, and then his mother came and kissed him soundly on the cheek. "Johnny," she said softly, "be careful." Like that, only like that, like she might have said it when he was a kid and when he was going out into the rain and did not want to wear his overshoes. But tears threatened to overflow the corners of her eyes.

His father was last. "You're going out there for the Children, Johnny. They'll be waiting and hoping and—hell, I never was any good at speeches. Find what we're looking for, son. Find it because we need it more than anyone ever needed anything." And then they were shaking hands, and John Hastings thumped his son's back and stepped away.

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Still Johnny stood there in the air-lock, unmoving.

"What's the matter?" Suuki demanded. "You do understand the piloting instructions I gave you—"

"It isn't anything like that. I thought Susan would be here to say goodbye, that's all."

Ellen Hastings turned to her husband, laughing. "I believe Johnny has a crush on that girl."

"Maybe. Can't say I blame him. She's brave and she's beautiful. If I were twenty years younger—"

"Oh, you!"

"Seriously, Ellen, if she's not here, she's not. Every minute Johnny waits gives the villagers more time to get organized. If they come busting up here and spot the starship, maybe it won't take off at all."

He hadn't spoken in any whisper, and Johnny heard him. "All right. I thought I'd wait a minute, but I'll go. Tell Susan goodbye for me. Tell her I'll bring back some souvenirs from the stars."

And the lock clanged shut behind him.

Less than five minutes later, the ship soared skyward on a fiery, incandescent pillar. Once it cleared the highest peaks, it vanished in less time than it takes a man to blink his eyes.

FASCINATED, Johnny watched the speed indicator. Acceleration gripped and held him, but it wasn't too painful. It would become intolerable, if and when the ship reached light-speed, but by then a harmless sleeping-gas would fill the cabin and put him into a deep sleep until all acceleration had ceased.

He watched the needle climb. Ten thousand miles per second, then twenty, which was as fast as a human had ever before travelled. Thirty thousand miles per second. Like a bloated white snowball, the moon slipped by off to his left. Forty thousand miles per second....

"Johnny! Johnny, it's beginning to hurt a little—"

Startled, he turned around. Susan Bentley stumbled toward him from the entrance to the pile-chamber. Acceleration tried to hold her back, but she plodded grimly forward and soon she sat down at his feet.

"Hello, Johnny."

"Susan! How on Earth—"

"Not on Earth, Johnny. In space. I'm here."

"I can see that. You crazy kid! This could be dangerous, because if Suuki's wrong we'll never live to see translight speed."

"They said it was dangerous when I went down into Paseo Diablo to rescue you. But I made it and I got you, Johnny. I wanted to come with you this time—I had to come with you."

Johnny shook his head. "Nuts to that. This is no place for a woman, Susan. So I'm going to turn this crate around and set you down at the city before it's too late." Tight-lipped, he began fingering the controls.

Quite suddenly, Susan was upon him, clawing at his hands, pulling him away from the control board. "I want to go, Johnny!"

Momentarily surprised by her onslaught, he was thrown to the floor, and Susan came down with him. She landed on top and he tried to squirm away and back to the controls, for he knew the ship neared light-speed now and once they reached it Suuki's gas would put them to sleep and there would be no turning back. But the girl held him there because she fought with acceleration on her side, pinning him to the floor with her weight.

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Since the ship rocketed straight up, acceleration pulled everything to the floor, and with four gravities tugging at them, Susan's hundred and ten pounds became more like half a ton.

"Get off me, you crazy fool! In a minute or two it'll be too late."

"That's what I want. Hah—try and stop me. I said I'm going with you, Johnny."

"Listen—"

"Don't argue with me. I'm going, that's all."

"Okay. Okay, I can't do anything about it now, but after we pass translight, you're going to get the spanking of your—"

"Very funny. Look who's talking!" Susan straddled him and her hands were planted firmly on his shoulders. Actually, that was so much theatrics and she probably knew it: she didn't have to wrestle with him, for the dead weight alone was sufficient to hold him down. A sack of grain, under four gravities, would have been equally effective. "Look who's talking," she said again. "Careful *I* don't do the spanking!"

Rage boiled up in Johnny. "You gawky little pip-squeak—"

"Temper...." Susan was laughing. "So you think it's funny? You think—"

And then he said no more. Something clicked loudly above them, and a sweetish odor assailed their nostrils. "That must mean we're reaching light-speed," Susan told him cheerfully. She yawned broadly. "Umm-mm. Getting sleeepy."

"That's the gas."

"Very sleepy. Johnny? Johnny, I'm afraid."

And that, he knew, was just like a girl. She had hidden aboard ship, fought for her right to stay. Now, all at once, she was afraid. She craved protection because he was a man and she was a woman. Almost, it was funny. He had tried to picture what it would be like, crossing the translight barrier. Alone at the controls, with acceleration racking every fibre of his body, watching the needle climb slowly, slowly....only it didn't turn out that way at all. He lay stretched out on the floor with a girl who temporarily weighed half a ton holding him down, whimpering for his protection.

"Nuts," Johnny said in a very small voice. And then the sweet odor increased. In another moment, he was fast asleep.

SOME TIME later, he got to his feet. Susan had managed to roll over on the floor, and she was stretched out, still sleeping, a yard away. He checked her pulse, found it normal, then staggered to the controls. He was tired, infinitely tired, and that probably confirmed Suuki's theory. All the way down to the atomic level, the cells of his body had been crushed, but—again on the atomic level—they had been recreated instantly, each atom as an individual unit. Hence the Chalice loomed larger than ever before: it healed men and it maintained their health, it made women beautiful and men handsome, but it was also a round-trip ticket to the stars.

The sub-light needle strained meaninglessly at the right side of its dial, but the second speed-gauge was functioning, its needle hovering near the number eighty.

Eighty! In a sense, it was meaningless. Eighty—eighty times faster than nature's laggard light! Or—the figures swam in his head—eighty times 186,000 miles per second. That meant they hurtled through the void at a speed approaching fifteen million

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miles a second. In ordinary space, of course, that would have been impossible. Einstein was no dodo, Einstein knew what he was talking about. But his universal field theory was not so universal after all; he had neglected sub-space altogether. No, it wasn't impossible to surpass the speed of light short of attaining infinite mass; you merely switched, quite automatically, from space to sub-space. And there, in a universe which contained neither stars nor space as we know it, the old laws did not apply.

"I'm hungry, Johnny."

"Huh? Oh, you're awake. Me, I guess I'm hungry too, but when you're busy with something else, it takes a woman to remind you of that."

"Well, aren't you going to do something about it?"

Johnny smiled. "The hell I will. It was your idea to tag along, and now that you're here I'd like to get some use out of you."

"So?"

"So scurry on back to the galley and fix something. Come on, scat."

Susan departed.

And soon afterwards, a pleasant odor drifted into the control room. A loud metallic clanging followed it as Susan banged lustily on a pot. "Soup's on," she cried.

Although he knew his way in the ship's cramped interior, Johnny's nose led him to the galley. Susan had done wonders. From the ship's frozen stores she had whipped together a cocktail, soup, steak and all the trimmings. Johnny said nothing. He sat down and was busy eating for the next twenty minutes.

Finally he stood up, patting his stomach gratefully. "Delectable," he said.

"You really liked it? I'm glad."

"You're all right, Susan."

"Hah'. I might have known. Put a good meal inside him and a man will be your friend for life. A while ago, you wanted to spank me."

"You deserved it. But I figure now that we're in this together, we might as well cooperate."

"I might as well cook, you mean. Johnny Hastings, you're nothing but a—a gourmet! And I don't mean that as a compliment. Tell you what, though. I'm willing to bury the hatchet. Shake?" And Susan stuck out her hand.

"*You're willing*? I like that." He ignored her hand. "Well, okay, but we'll do it my way."

"How's that?"

HE STEPPED inside the out-thrust arm and pushed it down at her side. He kissed her. He'd only meant it to be a friendly little peck, and he thought they'd both get a laugh out of it, but he found himself pulling her close, letting his lips linger on her warm red ones. Then on her cheek, her throat....

"Johnny—"

"I'm sorry," he said. He pulled away, stood off at a distance regarding her. "I shouldn't have done that."

"I didn't say I minded."

"No, that's not it. Listen, kid. We're alone. God knows we're more alone than two people ever were. Maybe the odds against ever getting back are tremendous, I don't know. But we'll have to act like we expect to return, and—well, we might find ourselves doing something we'll regret later."

Susan scowled. "Not only are you a gourmet, you're—you're a Victorian too. You're the most exasperating—"

"Stop it. Don't you see, I liked that kiss. I liked it too much, that's the trouble. I would have liked—"

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"Is there any law against it?"

"No. But I—Susan, I think I'm falling in love with you...." His voice trailed off lamely.

"My gosh! Don't say it like you're apologizing. Johnny, Johnny, don't you see, just because we're stuck out here doesn't mean we can't act like an ordinary man and an ordinary woman. There's no reason to cheat ourselves, especially since we may never get back."

"We can't be sure. Maybe it's the situation we're in. Maybe—we hardly know each other."

"So, all right. Will it help if I blush every night? Why don't you use your head? Why do you think I went down to Paseo Diablo like I did? Partly for an ideal, sure. I'll admit that. Only there was more, Johnny. There was you."

"We only saw each other for a few moments before that, but, well, you hear of things like that happening. And there were those days at the Chalice City, before we took this ship up."

"Stop trying to rationalize it or you'll spoil everything. Please."

"Okay. But let me think." Without waiting for an answer, he crossed to the port and looked outside. There was nothing. Utterly and completely nothing. A complete absence of anything. Just the total blackness, that and nothing more. And because everything outside was dark, perception disappeared. It was almost as if someone had painted the port black.

Soon, they fell into a routine. They ate three times during their arbitrary day period, and then they slept—Susan in the small bedroom, Johnny in the control room. He did not try to kiss her again, but at times her nearness made him giddy with desire. Often when she wasn't looking he would follow her every move with his eyes, and he might have felt better had he known she did the same thing with him.

AND THEN one day, some three weeks after they had started, they heard again the loud clicking sound, and Johnny thought he even hard Suuki's gas hissing in from some unknown vent. "That means we're decelerating," Johnny explained. "We're nearing our first goal, Susan, which happens to be the star Alpha Centauri. We're about to slow down to light speed and less, and deceleration can be just as bad as acceleration." He yawned. "Hey, I'm getting sleepy."

"Will we find anything, Johnny?"

He shrugged, strapping Susan into one of the acceleration hammocks and climbing into the spare himself. "That's a good question. I wish, well, I wish we clear atmosphere over some nice Centaurian planet and find a civilization of the first humans waiting for us. I guess that's too much to ask."

"Umm-mm." Susan was drifting off to sleep.

Perhaps, Johnny thought as he eased off into slumber, they've planted humans all over the galaxy. Whoever *they* are....

Alpha Centauri was a star of about the sun's size, but it belonged to a double-star system, and the companion, Proxima Centauri, turned out to be much smaller and fainter. When Johnny awoke he found they were back in normal space again, found that it was wonderful to see the familiar speckled vault of stars outside. And he gave vent to a primitive war-whoop when he saw that Alpha Centauri had a planet!

Only one, or so it seemed, here across an unthinkable gulf from the Solar System. Almost four-and-a-half light years, and still Centuari was the

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closest star. Johnny looked, saw Susan still slept. Chuckling, he decided to land on the planet before she awakened.

He reached it, circled it in a tight, low orbit—retrograde. That way, the planet's rotation would serve as a brake, and did. Presently Johnny was able to take the ship down through a dense white atmosphere which hid the surface features entirely. They came out of the billowing cloud masses abruptly, and Johnny could hardly suppress a moan. Flat gray rock stretched off to the horizon in all directions, broken only occasionally by bleak, jagged peaks which rose almost straight up and were lost in the lowest layer of clouds. Nothing moved, and there was no green which might indicate plant-life. Wearily, Johnny set the ship down with a slight bump, sufficient to awaken Susan.

"Good morning." She stretched languidly.

"Shh! I'm testing."

"What for?"

"Everything. Gravity, density of atmosphere, gasses present. Temperature. Stuff like that. Be finished in a minute."

He was, too. But all he did after that was scratch his head.

"What's the matter.

"I don't understand it. Gravity is within three percent of Earth-normal. Density of atmosphere, the same. There's a little over twenty-two percent oxygen in the air, which is close enough. For the rest, nitrogen, a little krypton and xenon. There's water vapor, too, but very little carbon dioxide. The temperature's fine, seventy degrees Fahrenheit. I don't understand."

"What? You mean the coincidence, this planet being so like Earth?"

"I don't mean that at all."

"Well, I think it's good. It means we'll find the life we're seeking and—what? You don't meant that? Then what do you mean?"

"I mean that there's no life. Take a look."

She did, and it made her shudder. "I've never seen anything so—so dead-looking."

"Well, we might as well put some life into it, kid. Let's hop outside and stretch our legs, anyway."

THEY did, and found that there was no wind. The air had a strange, flat smell, but it certainly was breathable. After a few moments, it even began to rain, in big, splattering drops.

"Everything for life is here," Johnny said. "Except life."

"What's so strange about that? If you're religious, you say God created the world, and life on it. Well, from that point of view, He's not going to create life just all over. Or, if you're not religious, you say that a happy combination of accidents is necessary to get life started. I once read someplace that the odds against those accidents' all happening together—even if the climate and everything else is right, like this—are tremendous."

Johnny nodded. "I guess you have something there. Whatever the vital spark was, it missed out here. Maybe some day it will come. Maybe—hey! Maybe we're bringing it. There's bacteria all over us, there always is. If some of them stay here after we leave, and if they can survive by eating one another and then multiply too—maybe we started something. And that could be the answer to what happened on Earth, a billion years ago. If some explorer from the stars came down and left some bacteria behind him as he inevitably would, well, there's your early Earth-life. That's how it began."

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Susan started to say something, but Johnny interrupted her: "Wait, I'm not finished. Remember I told you I wanted to think about something?"

"Yes. I remember." She looked glum.

"Well, I thought about it and, hell, this is as good a place for it as any. Maybe it will bring some life to this barren slab of a planet."

"For what? What will?"

"A marriage ceremony."

"What! Oh Johnny, Johnny—"

He took her in his arms and held her that way a long time, stroking her hair and kissing her. "I love you, kid. I—I want you to marry me."

"Marry you? How can we do that? You said something about a ceremony...."

"Sure did. It's going to be perfectly legal."

"I love you too, Johnny Hastings, but you're crazy."

"Think so? We won't have any witnesses, but we'll have everything else. You know what this place needs, Susan? It needs a politician—something—I know, a mayor. And there's an electorate of two, you and me. I nominate Johnny Hastings."

Susan was giggling. "I—I think I understand. You're goofy. But all right, I second the motion."

Let's vote. My vote is for Hastings. Good man."

"So is mine." Susan was still giggling.

JOHNNY cleared his throat, spoke in a deep voice. "As mayor of this this—ah, city, I have the legal right to marry people. Do you two want to be married?" And then, in a normal voice: "Sure do."

"Oh, yes. Yes, yes," said Susan.

"In that case—" Johnny's mayor's voice again—"with the power invested in me by the electorate of this city, with the—oh, hell, Susan, I forget how it goes."

"I never knew."

"Well, then we'll have to cut it short. Do you, Johnny Hastings, take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife, to have and to hold, to love, honor, and protect, through sickness and in health, till death do you part?" He cleared his throat, then said: "I do."

Another pause. "And do you, Susan Bentley, take this man to be your lawful wedded husband, to have and to hold, to love, honor, and obey, through sickness and in health, till death do you part?"

"Well," Susan laughed, "I don't like that obey part."

Johnny kissed her. "Do you?"

"Oh, yes. I do, I do—"

"With the power invested in me and harumph and so forth, I now pronounce you—us—man and wife."

They kissed.

"Johnny?"

"What?"

"I thought it would be silly. It was a little, maybe, but I liked it like that. We had our ceremony and we're really married. No one can take that away from us. It's much better than if we had—"

"You know," Johnny cut her short, "I think this is one hell of a lousy place for a honeymoon. Why don't we get back inside the ship and start off again? Then, after we reach subspace, we'll celebrate."

Susan grinned. "I obey, oh lord and master, just like the mayor said."

"Then come on." He took her hand and together they entered the spaceship. After blast-off, Johnny felt good. He felt wonderful, and, even, very much married. But something kept gnawing at the back of his mind, and he did not like it at all. If Alpha Centauri had been any indication of

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what they might find, perhaps they had set out upon a wild goose chase after all. And this planet had all the ingredients in perfect proportion—except life.

They *had to* find something! The Children of the Chalice depended on them. They had to find something and return with it, before it was too late.... And then the sleeping gas came, and their return to sub-space. After that, Johnny stared out for a moment at the utter blackness. They were alone, more alone than any man and woman ever had been before. Well, that was the way a honeymoon should be. Knifing at unthinkable speed through the deep void of sub-space, Johnny took his new wife into his arms....

CHAPTER V

THE DAYS became weeks, and the weeks sped by and were months. Earth was forgotten; almost, it was as if Earth had never been. They streaked in and out of sub-space—seeking, seeking. Time did not matter, for there was something timeless about the black, shoreless ocean of space with its myriad bright, flashing stars, its spinning, whirling, seething nebulae, its dense black clouds of cosmic dust, its occasional nova pulsing into brief glory.

Nowhere was life. They sought it on the swollen planets of blue-white giant stars, sought it again on the worlds of a triple-star system where the sky had a sun of orange and one of green and one of somber red. But the rocky barrens became legion, the harsh methane atmospheres mocked them, the frozen ice-worlds made them depart, shuddering.

Nowhere was life—until, one day, they found it. A lush green world swam in the port as they cleared sub-space and, trembling, Johnny set their frail ship down upon it. The jungle was dank and steaming with huge, fern-like trees arching overhead to form an impossible canopy five-hundred feet up in the sultry air. And the air, the air was noisy with the sounds of life. Every faint stirring of wind brought those sounds, sometimes far away and sometimes close.

"Maybe," said Johnny, and "maybe...."

But there was no sentience. A young world and a wild one, the planet would not know intelligent life for another half billion years, if at all. Wearily, they climbed back into their ship and Susan said, "We have each other."

But they had a home, too, back there along the dim, distant startrails, and Johnny told her that. "And our people," he said softly. "They're waiting and hoping. Don't you see, Susan, we can't return empty-handed. Somewhere in the galaxy is what we seek, and we can only keep right on seeking until we find it."

"But there are so many stars! We could spend a lifetime, *ten* lifetimes, looking—and find nothing."

"I know it. I know that, Susan. But look: for a long time we went and we thought there was no life anywhere, except in the Solar System. Today we found life, and tomorrow, who knows?"

"We'll stick to it, of course. I'm sorry I said that, but I guess I'm just depressed—"

"Well, let's consider it logically. Just where have we been?"

"Umm-mm. There's Centauri and Fomalhaut—"

"And Procyon and Deneb and Wolfe's Star—"

"And Antares, Sirius, Capella, Vega

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and Achernar. So many, Johnny. So many!"

Johnny smiled wanly. "We're still close to the Solar System, although we're a million times further than any man has ever been. There are more stars without names than those—"

"Don't, Johnny! You make it sound impossible."

"I didn't mean it that way. What I meant was this: first we'll have to look at the known stars, and that still leaves us a lot. Let's take out the star charts."

Susan brought the charts forward and spread them out on a table. "Okay," Johnny said, pointing. "We still have to go here, and here—"

Susan copied the names on a piece of scratch paper. Names that the ancient peoples of Earth had given the stars for one reason or another. Fanciful names and romantic. But hopeless names?

"Then here's the way it is, Johnny. Before we start getting worried, we'll have to visit Arcturus and Tau Ceti—"

"Sure, and Rigel, Altair and Betelgeuse. The sky is full of stars, kid, so stop worrying. There's still Canopus, Spica, Pollux, Regulus—hell, I could go on all day."

"Don't."

"All right, pick some names you like. It's hit or miss, it's got to be that way."

"Well, I like the sound of Regulus."

"Suits me," Johnny said cheerfully, starting to triangulate the position.

"And then Betelgeuse. Hah, I never knew how to pronounce that."

"Don't try. If there are natives, they'll call it something else, anyway. They'd probably call it something that means 'sun' in their own language, just like they'd call their planet something that means 'earth' or 'world' or maybe 'home'—"

"If that isn't just like you.... We haven't found anything more intelligent than a crocodile yet, but you're already giving a language to some unknown intelligence!"

"Regulus it is," said Johnny, "and then Betelgeuse. Incidentally, I always pronounced it like the first half of betelnut and the plural of goose, but I wouldn't bet on it. Well, here we go."

"And after those two, try Canopus."

"You bet," said Johnny. "We've got all the time in the world." He was smiling and his words were flip, but when acceleration gripped them, he didn't feel so cheerful. The sky was full of stars, all right, and he learned that more every day....

REGULUS had not even bothered giving birth to planets. It hung in space, an exile in the bleak marches of infinity, blue and hot and very much alone. They cleared sub-space long enough to find that out, long enough to see the blue orb spewing its energy out to an empty void. It was a month later. A month gone for nothing.

"Five of them," said Susan. "Five months."

Second on their list, Betelgeuse had a great family of planets, but the star itself was red, old, feeble. None of the sixteen planets could support life. All were too far from the primary, all too cold, all had seen their good years perhaps a billion years before the coming of man. Garbed in their cumbersome spacesuits, they poked around some incredibly ancient ruins on the eleventh planet. But, mostly, the ruins had crumbled into dust and what was left told them nothing except that the ancient race had not been human. Everything was built on a scale too small and the

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air contained thick traces of ammonia gas, anyway.

Back in their ship, Johnny lit a cigarette. They had no worry about food and their air automatically renewed itself, but such luxury items as cigarettes were fast disappearing and now he nursed this one along until it was hardly more than a glowing ember. "And for now," he said, "that leaves us Canopus."

"The names are all running together, Johnny. It's hopeless—"

He went on as if she hadn't spoken. "Canopus is a very unusual star."

"Yes? Why? They're all the same. Oh, the color is different, but they're all the same because none of them have what we're looking for." Susan began to whimper, softly, but each small sob racked her body.

Johnny placed his hand on her shoulder, but she tensed away from it. He tried to kiss her, found her face averted. She was laughing and crying, holding her head in her hands and not looking at him.

"Out of it, Susan! Snap out of it!"

He hit her, a hard slap which left an angry red imprint on her cheek. And after that her crying became normal and she let her head fall against his chest and used his tunic to wipe away her tears.

"I'm sorry—" he said.

"No. You had to do that. It helped, Johnny. I—I guess I was almost hysterical, but we're so alone...."

"Why don't you get some sleep? We can talk about Canopus in the morning."

"No. Every hour counts. Who can say what's happening to the Children now, after half a year? What did you want to say about Canopus?"

He lit one of the scarce cigarettes and gave it to her, watching as she blew smoke gratefully at the ceiling. "Well, for one thing, it's big. It's the brightest star in this entire section of the galaxy. It's even bright from Earth, and that's six hundred and fifty light years away. It's class is four, kid, which means it's a white giant. If there are any planets potentially suitable for life, they'd have to be in the neighborhod of a billion miles or more from their sun."

"What a place to get a sunburn!" Susan said, and laughed. The hysteria which had gripped her moments before was gone completely, and that was one thing Johnny had to learn about his wife: her moods knew more variations than a chameleon. And that did not mean, he also learned, that there was anything shallow about her. She simply had many facets, and each one, like the facet of a good gem, had its inner depths.

AND, WEEKS later: "There it is, Susan."

For a long time the girl stared from the port, stared into the inky depths of space outside. A star could be bright—it could be the brightest star in this entire sector of the galaxy, as, indeed, Canopus was—and still, space around it seemed very black and very cold.

Canopus shone brilliantly ahead of them as they surged forward on their regular space-drive. And something, a tiny spark, gleamed off to the left.

"Johnny—?"

"Yes," he cried. "Yes, it's a planet."

And they swept in toward it.

But it wasn't a planet, not really. It had a diameter of one thousand miles. It was all a solid white color—not gleaming, not dull—just white. And the surface was flat, utterly devoid of physical features. Like the black asteroid which held the Chalice!

They came down for a landing,

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heard the atmosphere shrieking around them outside. The world was a thousand times bigger than the black asteroid, but still it was not large enough to hold an atmosphere for long—unless, like the Black Asteroid, the whole thing was artificial....

"The atmosphere is perfect," Johnny said, half an hour after they had landed. "Oh, it's not exactly like Earth's, but it's close enough so you couldn't tell the difference just by breathing it."

Susan was busy with some instruments, too, and she told him: "Ditto on the gravity! The slightest fraction stronger than Earth-norm, but not enough so we'd notice it. The temperature's a little hot, ninety degrees Fahrenheit."

"You can thank Canopus for that."

"What's the difference? We can stand it. But you've been using the bio-scanner, Johnny. Is there any—"

"Life? What do you think? This planet looks like a hunk of chalk. No, the air's clean of spores of bacteria or anything else. No life here, Susan."

"Then, then Canopus is no good either? I really thought this time we'd find something." Susan smiled wanly.

"I didn't say it was no good. I said there's no life here. Maybe it doesn't matter. I'll tell you this, kid: the place is artificial."

"Man-made?"

"I dunno. *Someone* made it. It's too round and too flat and there'd have to be a force-field holding in the atmosphere and increasing the pull of gravity, too. Now, if it's artifical, someone made it for a reason. Suppose we go outside and find out why."

"Okay, but just you wait. I'm not going out into that ninety-degree oven wearing this jumper." And Susan was busy exploring in their clothing locker. "Hey," she called after a time, "there's nothing in here that a girl can wear."

Johnny laughed. "What did you expect? No one invited you along, honey."

"Oh yeah? Then you asked for it." There was a rustling, and then Susan stepped back into the cabin.

Johnny whistled. "You're going *that* way?"

"Sure. It's hot outside, and you're my husband, aren't you? Let's go."

Smiling, Johnny stripped down to his trousers, buckled a blaster around his waist, put fresh clips of ammunition in all his pockets. "You never know," he said. "We're liable to find anything, and this is just in case."

Susan began to giggle.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Oh, nothing, really. It's only that—well, it's exactly like the old stories you read. You're a man, and you're going outside armed to the teeth, complete with space-boots and leatheroid trousers. Me, I'm a woman, and I've seen a dozen magazine covers—well, maybe the women really *would* go like me!"

Laughing, they joined hands and stepped into the airlock.

CHAPTER VI

IT WAS hot, and quite dry. They felt the dryness at once, far worse than the heat. In a matter of hours, Johnny knew, it would parch their skin and crack their lips. Already, his eyes had begun to smart. They maintained a pleasant level of moisture within the ship, synthesizing water from compressed hydrogen and oxygen tanks, but the dry heat which swept over them now would make the Sahara feel like a dank, sultry jungle.

"Well," Susan shrugged doubtfully, "what do we look for? I don't see anything, Johnny."

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"No, but if *they* put this artificial planet here, it was for a reason. See? Look at that ground, it's artifical, all right. There's not a fault, a crack—nothing."

"Welcome to Cyberworld!"

"Susan?"

"Hunh? What's Cyberworld?"

"That's what I wanted to ask you. Didn't you say—"

"I didn't say anything. But you said, 'Welcome to Cyberworld.' Though, come to think of it, it didn't sound like your voice. In fact, it didn't sound like any voice. It just made noise kind of inside my head."

"Welcome to Cyberworld. Respond, respond!"

"Johnny, I'm afraid!"

Something was speaking. Not aloud, but within their heads. If Susan hadn't heard it too, Johnny might have thought he was going off his rocker. But the voice which was not a voice at all spoke to both of them. And what had it said—respond...

"Thank you for your welcome," Johnny said aloud, feeling foolish. Susan was trembling despite the heat, and he draped his arm around her bare shoulder. He looked around them, saw nothing but the even, chalky expanse of whiteness. He began to sweat, and it wasn't the heat alone.

"Ask me questions, please." The whisper which came within his head suddenly was almost plaintive. "Ask me questions. Anything."

"Johnny, I heard it again...."

"Shh! All right, who are you?"

"I am no one."

Silence.

"Then *what* are you?"

"Ahh, that is better." Sibilant, metallic, eager, the voice spoke within his head. Susan's eyes were open wide and she cocked an ear as if she were listening to something. She heard it too, and that made Johnny feel better.

"That is much better, for I am a machine and hence the answer to your first question had to be a negative one. More particularly, I am a cybernetics machine."

"Where are you?" Johnny still felt foolish.

"I am here. Everywhere. I am the world under your feet. I am this planet."

"All of it?"

"Yes, all of it. I am a memory vault and a limited form of sentience which slumbers until human presence is felt."

"Yeah?" Trust Susan to get cocky when she was afraid! "Then what triggered you off?"

"You did. The human brain emits electro magnetic wave lengths along a certain frequency. They waken me, and I answer questions."

"How do you speak in our language?" Johnny demanded. "None of our people constructed this place."

"I speak no language. I speak all languages. The medium is telepathy, and your brain does the translating. Although I know enough about you to speak your language aloud if I desired. You are of the planet Earth, of the star Sol. You are John Hastings, Jr., and the female is Susan Bentley."

"Susan Hastings!" Susan wailed.

"Bentley-Hastings," the machine compromised. "It does not matter. Ask me questions."

Johnny chuckled softly. After the novelty wore off, it began to grow amusing. The machine had a one-track mind, provided machines had minds. Ask it questions....

"Why do you always say that?" Johnny wanted to know.

"Simple. I was constructed to answer questions. My memory vaults fill the interior of this globe completely, and, literally, I can answer anything. Try me."

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"How old are you?"

"Umm-mm, five millions of your years."

"Five million!"

"Certainly. I'm no youngster." The unheard metallic voice which yet gave the strong suggestion of sibilancy now sounded casual, almost friendly.

IT MADE Susan blush and attempt to cover herself self-consciously with her arms. "Do you think he—he can see me? I mean, the way I am...."

Johnny smiled, enjoying himself: "I didn't tell you to come out that way. But, seriously, you can forget about it. Who said anything about a he? It's an *it*."

"Well, I don't like it," Susan persisted. "Ask whatever you want, Johnny, but then let's get out of here."

"Suits me. Who put you here—five million years ago?"

The reply came at once, and Johnny somehow could picture the impossibly vast memory vaults beneath his feet shuffling and reshuffling through a maze of indexed information. "The first humans, naturally. It was after they had developed the powers of regeneration and after they had broken out into deep space. They stopped here first and constructed a planet. This planet. Me. This planet which circles Canopus once in every—"

"Never mind. Why did they build you?"

"Elementary. I am here precisely because such as you might come. However, you are first. The very first in five million years. An age ago, the first humans journeyed out into space with a plan. Perhaps it was a noble plan, but that is not my province. They were the Lords of Creation and they knew it. Their plan was a dream—to spread their seed across the galaxy. This they did, and returned. Naturally, suitable planets were limited. Your Earth is one, Mars and Venus in your Solar System, others. All told, there are three hundred and seventy-five. Would you like to see some of them?"

"Would we!" Johnny cried. "You bet we would."

There was a silence and then Johnny—saw. He didn't know how, but he saw. The picture came in his brain only, for when he shut his eyes he could see it quite clearly. Three-dimensional, colored, vibrantly alive.

The metallic voice droned. "This is the planet Glehna of the star Spurl. You will observe that—"

But he paid the voice no attention. It wasn't necessary. The sun was orange, a deep, mellow orange. The fields were lush, but purple, not green. Men and women worked in them, big, strong men, comely women, naked but for loin cloths.

"They are primitive on Glehna," said the voice. "Their machine age lies some three thousand years ahead of them, but they are a happy people. Next, you see Lulalim, of the star Li. Here the people are not so happy."

A SOMBER landscape, thrusting naked crags up at a heavy, black-laden sky. A blue sun, but far away, showing briefly through a rent in the clouds. It was cold. Johnny could almost feel the cold, and because he could see the picture in his head and not his eyes, he saw also that Susan was shivering. Then she saw it too....

"The environment is not ideal for man," said the machine. "Man can barely scratch out an existence, and so it is entirely possible that on Lulalim men shall always be barbaric. You will notice, by the name of their planet, the softness of their language.

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A reaction to the harsh environment—"

The picture wavered, flickered as the voice trailed off. Another took its place. The depths of space—a crude, rocket-driven spaceship in the background, men spewing from its port, helmeted, space-suited, rockets strapped to their shoulders. With the reckless grace of practiced mayhem, they boarded another ship. Of their number, many died, but others there were who reached the second ship, blasted their way within, fought and died for some nameless cause. Johnny thought he saw a skull and crossbones emblazoned on one man's arm before the arm and the man disappeared in a flare of radioactivity.

"These are the people of Shilot," the machine purred. "A crude form of interplanetary travel is theirs, but they fight senselessly among themselves. They will never reach the stars."

Again the picture wavered, disappeared.

And there were others. After a while, Johnny lost track of them. The civilizations pictured varied; some were hardly civilizations at all, others had developed to a remarkably high degree. But not one of them had yet reached up for the stars.

"All right," Johnny snapped. He could have watched all day, looking at the great pageant of a humanity which was spread out thinly across the incredible reaches of the galaxy. But the machine had no intention of hurrying, apparently, and Johnny couldn't merely stand there watching. "All right. But it seems peculiar. Are we of Earth the most highly advanced of all the human cultures?"

"No one told you that, John Hastings, Jr. There have been others, according to my records, although none of them have ever come here. Naturally, when they developed star-travel they also found their Chalices. One planted, in each case, in some remote part of the particular star system. Observe—"

The world he saw now was dark and dead, but it glowed. There was something unwholesome about that glow, the way it pulsed from horizon to horizon, flickering brightly and obscuring the red sun. There were cities, or what had been cities—crumbled and fallen into ruin. Not very long ago, it seemed. Nowhere was life.

"They found the Chalice," the voice droned. "And because they could not all use it, war resulted. It was a deadly war, fought with radioactive weapons, and, as you can see, the planet is a radioactive corpse, festering forever in the void.

"Again, the same thing happened over and over." As the voice continued, the picture faded, another one taking its place almost at once. "This is Karnok, of the sun Karnokkay. Here they are a generation behind, but the results will be identical in time."

The city thrummed with activity, a bustling, busy metropolis the size of New York. It had been a great port once, for Johnny could see the massive quays protruding out into an inlet of some nameless ocean. But the waters of that ocean glowed dully, dangerously. Radioactivity once more? Johnny couldn't tell, but not one ship plied those waters.

Something streaked in over the city from the south, a hurtling thing all silver and glass in the bright sunlight. It hovered over the city, and something else, smaller, winged down from its silvery belly. A few moments later a fiery mushroom errupted from the streets of the city, and when, after what must have been a long time, it

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was carried away by the winds, the city was dead.....

"They fight for their Chalice. One nation has it, the other wants it. The war will engulf both in destruction."

"That couldn't happen on Earth," Susan said. But it sounded more like a question. "After all, we don't have nations. We have one world state, and it's a democratic one."

"Sure, but there are pressure groups. You saw them for yourself. And what about the way the Children are treated? Civil War could mean the same thing, but—"

Said the voice: "On this next planet, you will see—"

"That's enough! I have another question. Who are those that created you?"

"I have said, the first humans."

"Yes, I know that. But who, and where?"

Silence. Then: "That information is classified. One moment, please."

Johnny and Susan looked at each other hopelessly.

"CLASSIFIED? What does he mean by classified?"

Johnny grinned wearily. "Not he, it. But search me, kid. I don't know what *it* means...."

Suddenly, something groaned beneath their feet. Johnny blinked, and when he looked again, a portal had opened in the flat white rock of the planet. One moment there was nothing—the next, a circular pit awaited them.

"Enter," said the machine's voice. And, when they failed to move: "You have nothing to fear, provided your intentions toward the first humans are friendly. I have said enter. Enter."

Johnny shrugged. "What do you think, kid?"

"Don't look at me. But we're not getting anywhere by staying here, that's for sure."

"Well, okay." And Johnny stalked toward the pit.

As it turned out, a flight of stairs awaited them, and it reminded Johnny of the nine steps leading to the Black Chalice. Naturally, he thought, the same builders....

The stairs led around and down, descending in a circular fashion for about a hundred feet. And at the bottom, they found themselves in a small, square room with a soft, almost spongy floor.

"Lie down."

"Hunh?"

"I said, lie down. We will conduct certain psychological tests to determine the frame of reference in which you hold the first humans. If it is a friendly frame, you go from here with the information you seek. If it is hostile, you do not leave here at all. The vault will simply close in upon you. The third alternative is this: you may withdraw now and depart without receiving any information."

Susan frowned. "If we flunk whatever test he has up his sleeve, we're buried alive. All right, *it*. *Its* sleeve! But Johnny, what kind of test...."

"That beats heck out of me. How should I know? But look, we've got nothing against these first humans, have we? We came to find them in the first place?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Well, don't get optimistic on me. It's not entirely true. Subconsciously, we're probably both bitter. The first humans planted the Chalice in our Solar System, so, as a result, we're hated, feared, fought with—"

"You mean maybe *it* will interpret that as hostile?"

Johnny shrugged. "A possibility. All I'm trying to say is this: we can't

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be sure. This machine of a planet will be completely objective, but what it calls hostility might be something we wouldn't think of that way at all. Think it's worth a try?"

"Johnny, you sound almost flip. But—"

"I know. Our lives depend on it. I don't know what the answer is, but it's a cinch we won't find what we're looking for unless the machine tells us. So, I think we ought to give it a whirl."

For answer, Susan turned and faced him, placing her arms around his neck. "I thought so all along, but I wanted to hear you say it."

"Well, I said it."

"Kiss me, stupid. Umm-mm. . . ."

And then they had stretched out, side by side, on the spongy substance, while the voice repeated again and again, "Lie down, lie down—ahh, that is good!"

A pause. Then: "You are asleep." Simply stated, with no fanfare, no preambles. The ultimate in hypnotism, for Johnny felt one brief instant of vertigo, reached out to clutch Susan's hand, but didn't make it. He was sound asleep less than a second after the voice commanded it.

HE AWOKE with a headache. Dimly, he half-remembered dreaming, and while he could not remember what he dreamed, the thought of it somehow left him strangely frightened. "Susan?" he whispered. "You all right?" He smiled. There are certain places, certain happenings, which make you want to whisper. This crypt with its dreaming, hypnotic sleep was such a place.

"Yeah, I guess so. I have a headache."

"Me too. Well, I guess we passed the test. At least, I see no indications that we're locked in here."

Then, came the metallic voice: "You are quite right. While your brains display a marked amount of hostility and ambivalence toward the Chalice, they regard the first humans only in reverence. As a result, the classified information is yours for the asking. Ask me questions."

"Where are the first humans?" Johnny demanded.

"They exist in a star-system which has not been named by you."

"Oh. In that case, it's probably hundreds of light years from here. A long trip, but we can make it."

"You do not understand. You have not named the particular star-system because it is remote. Truly remote. It is in the galactic satellite which, in your language, is referred to as the Greater Magellanic Cloud. It is therefore—"

"What!" Johnny gasped. "Magellanic Cloud—that's so far from here that we couldn't reach it in a dozen lifetimes, even with our sub-space drive."

"To be precise, the distance is 26,000 parsecs, or 86,000 light years. Although it is actually within the outer fringes of the Milky Way Galaxy, the Greater Magellanic Cloud is, for all intents and purposes, an exterior galaxy."

Susan pouted. "That's great. Oh, that's just wonderful. Now that we know where the first humans are, we can't do a thing about it."

"Ask me questions," the machine purred in their minds.

"Can we get there?" said Johnny.

"Of course."

"That's ridiculous." Perhaps, he thought, the machine had misinterpreted the question. "How can we get there? Not with our sub-space drive?"

"That is correct. Not with your subspace - subspace - subspacesub - space. . . ."

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Quite suddenly, the machine voice which spoke and yet did not speak sounded like a broken record. The same syllables, over and over again.

"It broke down!" Susan wailed.

"....spacesubspace...."

Johnny couldn't help smiling, in spite of the situation. "Well, after all these millions of years, I guess it kind of needs oil. But that's a hell of a note, when we're getting so close to the answer—"

"....subspacesubspace....ah! I oil myself, you see, but sometimes it takes time until the various units can attain harmony once more. Now, what were you asking?"

Johnny wiped the sweat off his forehead with a trembling hand. "How can we get to the Greater Magellanic Cloud?"

"I can send you. That, also, is why I am here. The first humans planned it this way, for beyond sub-space there is something which, for want of a better term, I call folded space."

"I don't get it," Susan protested.

"Elementary. In sub-space, you can travel far faster than light, but not fast enough when intergalactic distances must be coped with. In folded space, that is precisely what happens —space is folded. You would not understand the science behind it, but it is precisely as if space were a sheet of paper and you could somehow fold it, corner to corner. Thus, to get from one corner to the other it would not be necessary to travel across the length of paper. Instead, through folding the sheet the corners are made to coincide. Travel is instantaneous. And such is folded space."

Johnny chuckled grimly. "Okay, I won't argue with you. When can you send us?"

There was a pause. Then: "Now, if you wish."

"We sure do."

"But much has happened on Tawroc since I was created...."

"Tawroc?"

"Tawroc, the home of the first humans. I think you will be sorely disappointed, for, although they created me—"

"Well, just let us decide that."

"Good enough. You will, naturally, need a command of the language of Tawroc. *So*—"

JOHNNY was aware of an unfamiliar rustling within his head, and the suggestion of pain with it. Looking at Susan, he saw her face was strained, twisted, distorted. Then, did the pain affect her more strongly? He reached out to comfort her, but abruptly, the strangeness within his head subsided, and his wife relaxed visibly.

"It is done," the machine told them. "You will speak Tawroc when you have to. But, because I do not believe you will find on Tawroc what you seek, I will await your return here. Now, are you prepared to leave?"

"Yes," said Johnny.

"No!" This was Susan, indignantly. "If you think I'm going any place where there are people, dressed the way I am—"

"Undressed, you mean," Johnny laughed.

Together, they climbed the stairs, returned to their ship, got clothing for Susan and more arms for both of them. In the crypt once more, the machine's voice was impatient.

"Vain," it mused. "Humans are so vain. But I perceive you are ready. Goodbye, good luck, but I think you will be a lot wiser when we meet again."

Johnny looked around uneasily. "I don't understand," he admitted. "What can that mean, we'll be disappointed with Tawroc? The birthplace of hu-

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manity, kid—can you imagine what that means? It was there, millions of years ago that the seed was spawned. Now it's spread out over the length of the galaxy. But Tawroc, Tawroc should be as close to heaven as a man can ever get and still live."

"Eighty six thousand light years," was all that Susan said. "Can it be done...?"

Johnny did not know, nor did he have a chance to ponder it. Something seemed to grip him and twist, and he felt, impossibly, that he was being turned inside out! It failed to last long. He knew, dimly, that it could not. Even the Children would not long survive the exquisite pain which lanced through every atom of his being. He heard Susan screaming, saw her as through a dense fog, far, far away. He tried to reach her, but she floated away on that unreal sea of fog, the wraiths of it swirling and billowing between them. He called her name, heard it rebound at him from all sides, *"Susan, Susan, Susan..."*

The fog carressed him, brought with it a brief awareness of utter cold. Tumbling headlong into a pit of that cold, Johnny remembered nothing more....

CHAPTER VII

THEY WERE on a beach, a wide, sandy beach which sloped down gradually until it met the sea. The water had a strangely reddish cast and Johnny thought first of plankton until he looked up and saw the sky, too, was a glowing crimson. Clouds obscured the sun, but he knew, if he could see it, the day-star would be somber red. A hundred yards down the slope, the waves shattered themselves to red-spray, billowing and roaring and tumbling back upon the waves behind them. Fury lashed those waters and it might have been a hurricane. But the air was quiet. Then the sun was close, and over on the night side of the planet, one or more big satellites must have whipped the nameless ocean to a frenzy.

"Where are we?" Susan asked, propping herself up on one elbow and brushing the sand from her hair. And, when Johnny laughed: "I know it's a stereotyped question, but where *are* we?"

"Tawroc, I guess. Wherever Tawroc is. That machine wasn't kidding."

"That's fine," Susan said. "That's just fine. He—*it*—only neglected to tell us one thing."

"What's that?"

"How the hell are we going to get back from here?"

It was a good question. Canopus and their ship lay across the length of the galaxy from them, and Canopus was a thousand times brighter than Sol. Even Canopus, at this distance, would be nothing but a tiny mote, lost in the deep, far away clouds which formed the Milky Way.

"Later," Johnny said. "Ask me that later. Right now—hold on, what's that?"

Someone was coming up the beach toward them. At this distance he wasn't much more than a tiny dot, but soon he came closer and they could see it was a man. He hailed a greeting at them and it was in some strange, alien tongue. *"Kortu!"* he cried, and again: *"Kortu!"*

"That means hello," Johnny found himself saying, and then, startled, he raised a hand to his mouth. He'd said: *"Chora ben kila tok."* They were nonsense syllables, they could have utterly no meaning for him or for Susan. Yet, saying them, he understood.

"My gosh," said Susan. She didn't

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say it in English, but Johnny comprehended.

"I think I understand," he mused, again in the perfectly understandable alien tongue. "That machine wasn't fooling, he gave us the language of Tawroc, but it remained dormant in our brains until a word in the language triggered it off. Now we know it, and speak it."

They couldn't doubt this one final improbability. The machine, indeed, had seemed capable of anything, and one minor miracle more or less wouldn't matter.

By now, the man who had hailed them was approaching, and Johnny watched him trudging along through the sand. He was middle-aged, with a long, careless shock of iron-gray hair, an intelligent face and a short, stocky figure.

"Kortu!" Johnny cried. "Greetings!"

"Greetings yourself. What are you two doing down here on the beach?"

"We just arrived," said Johnny.

"Fine weather we've been having, if you go in for admiring the weather. Personally, I don't. Some primitives still do, and I thought the way you were dressed, and all—"

THE MAN wore a sort of coverall, but if there were any seams, Johnny failed to see them. The outfit was of some metallic material, and it seemed to flow fluidly with every motion the man made.

"We're strangers here," Johnny told him. He was beginning to enjoy himself. He could picture the man's face when he was told that the two before him had come from the stars. A culture-dream realized, after how many millions of years?

"Strangers? I don't understand." Then, suspicion crossed the man's face. He came close to Johnny, stood on tiptoe, peered into his eyes. He relaxed. "Oh, you're blue eyes, all right. Is the woman yours?"

"Yes, my wife. We have come—"

"Haven't seen any brown eyes in days. Guess we chased them off this continent. If we keep winning the way we are, the sides will have to be changed, of course. Too bad, for I really learned to hate brown eyes."

"We have something to tell you. We—we're not of Tawroc."

"Hah-hah. Not of Tawroc. That's good. Hah-hah!"

"I'm not joking."

"Well, then explain yourself. How can that be?"

"We are from the stars. Wait—don't laugh. You see the Milky Way Galaxy in the sky at night, don't you?"

"See it? It practically covers the entire sky! Of course I see it. So what?"

"So that's where we come from. A planet called Earth, circling a star called Sol. A generation ago, we found the Chalice you left, and—"

"That's interesting." The man clucked his tongue once or twice, nodded. "That's interesting. You plan to stay long? Look me up some time in Chandros City if you do. Meanwhile, guess I have to go on down the beach and look for brown eyes. Never know where they're liable to pop up, the rats."

Johnny felt something was wrong. He couldn't tell what, but it was something. Perhaps the man hadn't understood.

"My name is John Hastings," he said. "This is my wife, Susan. We're not native to Tawroc. We come from the Milky Way Galaxy, thanks to the Chalice your people planted in our Solar System, an eon ago."

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The man yawned, stretched, watched the tides come booming in. "You already told me that. Have a nice trip?"

"Man, don't you realize we've come across eighty six thousand light years to see you? You planted our seed on Earth, and we spawned. We found your Chalice—"

"You already told me that, too. And don't you think I know my history? Too bad you didn't arrive a bit earlier, you could have taken part in the brown-eyes blue-eyes war. Almost over, I think. Say, wait a minute! I thought there was something fishy here!"

Wordless now, the man peered intently at Susan's face. "Ah-hah!" he cried triumphantly. "Brown eyes, I might have known." Before Johnny could stop him, he had reached into a pocket of his coverall—the pocket seemed invisible, but it was there, for when he thrust his hand laterally across his chest, it disappeared within the garment. He came up with a small, slender tube, pointed it at Susan. Something glowed briefly and she did an abrupt flip-flop in mid-air, then fell on her face in the sand.

"SUSAN!" Johnny cried. He kneeled by her still form, turned her over tenderly, felt for the heartbeat. It was there—but faint. He stood up, rage contorting his features. "Damn you—"

The man clucked softly, returned the weapon to its invisible sheath. "Are you sure *your* eyes are blue?" he demanded.

Johnny hit him, felt his knuckles crunch on the man's thin jaw, watched him fall and land on his back.

Wiping blood from his lips, he looked up at Johnny. He seemed very confused. "Why did you do that?" He shook his head sadly. "Why?"

"Damn you—"

"Oh, don't worry about your wife." The man didn't wipe his mouth any longer, for the bleeding had stopped. "She'll be up and around any minute now. Of course, she'll have to go to Casualty Island for the duration. But I have a suspicion this war won't last much longer, anyway."

Susan stirred. Her eyelids fluttered, and, in a moment, she got to her feet groggily. "What hap—"

"Don't talk!" the man protested. "It's against regulations. I got you fair and square, there's no denying that. There'll be a boat leaving for Casualty Island this afternoon and, naturally, you'll be on it."

Susan frowned. "What's he talking about?"

"I don't know. I think he's crazy. He must be crazy."

"Now, listen, young woman. You've got to follow the war-ethics. There wouldn't be much sense to warfare if you didn't. Although, I must admit some people are growing bored with it, anyway. Say, maybe you'll have some suggestions. What do you do on your world for diversion?"

"Well," Susan began, "we—"

"Skip it," Johnny told her. "He's a first-class nut. Uh—Mr.—"

"Nabish, name's Nabish."

"Nabish, where's the nearest city?"

"Right back of the beach that way, two or three miles. Depends on whether you mean the metropolitan area or the city itself. I always say—"

"Thanks," Johnny told him, leading Susan away. Nabish clucked his tongue in sad confusion as they departed.

THE CITY was quite beautiful. They saw it first from a rocky highland overlooking both it and the beach. It spread out below them, circular, the avenues radiating from a

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central plaza like spokes from the hub of a wheel. Flat-roofed and square, all the buildings were low, graceful structures.

"Want to go down there now?" Susan asked.

Johnny nodded. He couldn't get the man named Nabish out of his thoughts. He'd seemed intelligent, even perfectly rational, if you could disregard that business about a brown-eyes—blue eyes war. He even seemed to understand when they said they'd come from a far world, from the Milky Way Galaxy, which certainly should be the predominant feature of the night sky here. But—if he understood—he didn't care. It failed to stir him. And Johnny, for his part, had expected the people of Tawroc to receive Susan and himself as a father might receive his long-lost son. Racially, that was the relationship, but Nabish's attitude, assuming the man were sane, could foster only confusion.

A broad avenue swept around the outer fringes of the city's radiating streets. This was the rim of the wheel, Johnny thought idly. He'd have been interested if they hadn't met Nabish first but, with Nabish gnawing at the back of his mind, architectural beauty left him cold.

The avenue was crowded with vehicles, but so fast did they streak by that Johnny could hardly see their design. Vaguely, they were tear-drop-shaped, hugging the ground and zooming over it as if they somehow did away with friction. There were pedestrians, too, waiting to cross on either side of the avenue. Every now and then, one would dart out into the street and hurtle, dodging and weaving, to the other side. There was no screeching of breaks as the vehicles sped on by, and not one of the pedestrians had an easy time of it.

"People can get killed that way," Susan said, and laughed nervously.

"Not Chalice people," Johnny reminded her. "Oh, they can be maimed, but they'll heal."

"Still, you'd think they'd develop some kind of traffic control. The accident rate must be awful high...."

Johnny whirled around then. Someone was screaming. He caught a brief glimpse of a woman darting out across the street, saw one of the zooming vehicles bear down on her. She tried to avoid it, but the vehicle bore on, swerving neither to left nor to right. There was a crunching sound, and more screaming as the woman was borne along for a score of yards under the vehicle. A moment later, her broken, bloody form remained on the highway, while more cars streaked past.

"How awful!" And Susan averted her face.

A BELL clanged somewhere, and a portal opened in one of the square buildings. Out came four men, carrying a stretcher. They waited several seconds, then ran out across the road with it, scooping the woman up and carrying her back to the building. In a moment, the portal shut.

Two men stood a few feet off at Johnny's left, and he heard them talking. "Shame about Lidun," one said.

"Yes. There was to be a party at her house tonight. But it will be two days before she's herself again."

"Umm-mm. Yes. She got mashed pretty badly, so I guess they'll have to give her new features. Well, she never was very pretty."

"Her husband's going to be furious. Hah, poor Skandar. That's the third time this month his wife has met with an accident. I always said Lidun wasn't the most graceful woman in the world."

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"What you forget is that Skandar is brown-eyes, and a casualty, too. He won't know anything about this till after the war is over. Lidun's suing for divorce anyway—can't blame her, not while this war is being fought."

Johnny cleared his throat. "Hello," he said, smiling.

"Eh? Hi, neighbor. Don't think I know you."

"My name's Hastings."

"An odd name. You from Syloph or one of the mountain cities?"

"No. Some place else. Does this sort of thing happen all the time?"

"What sort of thing?" The two men looked at each other queerly.

"This accident. I mean, I should think you'd have a way of regulating traffic—"

"Where *are* you from?"

"A long way off. What I mean is—"

"He must be one of those mountain yokels," the second man said. "Only thing they have to worry about there is the animals. But then, that can be pretty rough. Yes, friend, this sort of thing happens all the time. Why shouldn't it?"

"Why shouldn't it? Well. . . ."

"It's perfectly harmless. Lidun will be dodging cars again in two days. Unless they call her number on the lottery and decide she's to be un-Chaliced."

"Don't tell me that can be done?" Johnny demanded.

"Why, naturally. Where did you say you were from?"

"I didn't."

"Well, wherever it is, you certainly must know about the lottery. It's just to keep life interesting, friend, and the Almighty knows we need something to keep life interesting, eh? One each month out of every hundred thousand people is un-Chaliced. Poor things, a lot of them commit suicide. But then, you can't blame them. Funny thing about the rest of them, they go off to live in the mountains some place—"

"No," his companion corrected him, "in the desert. They go off into the desert."

"The mountains!"

"Desert."

"Mountains."

"Des—"

The first man took one of the tubes from his coverall, pointed it at his companion, who glowed briefly, then fell. A bell clanged again, and the stretcher-bearers shuffled out of their building, retrieved the body, returned inside with it.

"As I was saying," the first man went on, "they hide off in the mountains some place, and—I'll be un-Chaliced! He was right. Jor was right. It's the desert, I remember reading something about that. Well, I'll have to apologize to Jor when he's up and about again. Anyway, what were we talking about?"

"Forget it," Johnny told him. "Listen, who's your civic leader here? I'd like to see him."

"Civic leader? What's that?"

"An official. A mayor, or president or city-planner. Something—"

"There's no such man."

"Your government, then. Where's your government building?"

"Government? Oh, a body that governs. Why, there's no such thing. Be an awful lot of waste, wouldn't it? What do we need a government for?"

"Isn't there anyone with authority?"

"Of course. Each man's his own authority. The Almighty knows life is boring enough, without someone having to restrict your behavior. Say, how come you're so naive?"

"Forget it," Johnny said again. "How about a scientist? I'd like to see a scientist."

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"Well, every man to his own opinion, I always said. But what do you want to see one of those idiotic hobbyists for?"

"Hobbyist? Don't you have any professional scientists?"

"What do we need them for? We've got everything we want. But, as I've said, there are some who dabble in science. Hobbyists. Want to see one, eh? Well, umm-mm, let's see. Yes, Condan would be your man. Condan." Here the man paused, took what looked like a sheet of paper from his invisible pocket, wrote on it. "This is Condan's address, my friend. What did you say your name was?"

"Hastings."

"Right, Hastings. See you some time, but then, if you meet with an accident between now and then, I might not recognize you. Keep interested."

CONDAN'S house was like all the rest, and Johnny paused before running his hand in front of the electric eye on the door-frame.

"I don't like this place," Susan said, shaking her head.

"I don't understand it. Well, maybe this Condan—" And he heard chimings within the place when he ran his hand across the electric eye.

In a few moments, a woman came to the door, tall, angular, unpretty. "Yes?"

"We'd like to see Condan?"

"What for?"

"Hunh?"

"I work here, so I have to see the horrible old man, but why anyone else would want to see him I cannot understand."

"Still, we want to see him."

"Hmph! I'll tell him he has callers."

And the woman plodded back through a foyer, muttering to herself.

Condan followed her when she returned to them a few moments later. Condan was short, bent, quite thoroughly bald, with beady little eyes that darted furtively first from Johnny to Susan and then back again. "Yes?" he demanded, his voice squeaking effortlessly over two octaves while it uttered that single word.

"You're a scientist," Johnny said. "We'd like to speak with you about—"

"Very well, young man. Whatever it is, very well. But first allow me to apologize for my hobby. Yes, I am a scientist, but not out of direct choice. I tried arson as a hobby first, but I'm too clumsy, and I burned myself up pretty badly after three tries. Assassination, next, but it's a thankless labor, for no matter how well you do your job, your victim is up and around within a few days. Next I tried...but I'm boring you, and we can't have that.

"In short, I tried everything. Science alone remained, and so I dabbled. Actually, it does have its rewards, for I have heard of someone who met with an accident while using acid, and—"

"I see," Johnny told him wearily. "What science do you specialize in?"

"Why, none in particular. All of them. I'm the word's foremost scientist, I'm sorry to say, but then, remember it wasn't out of direct choice. I just had nothing to do with my spare time, you see."

"I still don't like this place," Susan whispered.

But Johnny said: "We don't come from Tawroc."

"Umm-mm. That's nice. Perhaps I can write a paper. But sadly, few will read it. What precisely do you mean, you don't come from Tawroc?" Mild curiosity showed on Condan's features. He scratched his bald head.

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"Well, do you know any legends of your ancestors, ages ago?"

"Oh, yes," Condan answered brightly. "I know of many such legends. There is, for example, one which tells of our people before they had the Chalice. It must have been terrible, because people are bored unless there are accidents, and without the Chalice accidents too often would prove fatal."

"I don't mean quite that far back," Johnny persisted. Part of his mind by now realized that their quest was a hopeless one here on Tawroc. But, doggedly, he stuck with it. "I mean soon after your people developed the Chalice."

"Oh, yes! That legend has always been one of my favorites. We went out to the stars—some say even across the great gulf of space to the Milky Way Galaxy. And there we set the seed for mankind. It is very interesting, although, if you dwell upon it too long, it becomes boring, like everything else."

"We're from the Milky Way Galaxy," Johnny told him. "We are the fruit of that seed. And we've come a long way."

"I believe you. I do. I really do. And let me tell you that's very nice, young man. Yes, I certainly must write a paper, although I doubt if I have the funds to publish it. Well, perhaps next year."

"Darn it!" Susan finally had lost her temper, and now she raged at the little scientist, who did not quite know what to make of the situation. "Darn it! You might at least congratulate us. You should all feel like a—like a God, almost. But you just stand there and say that's nice! Darn it—"

"She must be bored, poor thing," Condan decided. "Did you ever think of taking her away to the mountains for a few months? Some of the animals are quite ferocious, and it's usually a stimulating vacation. I would—my word, it's three o'clock."

INSIDE, something had clicked loudly, three times.

"I'm the lottery man this month, you know. Three o'clock. That makes you two the winners. You'll be un-Chaliced, of course. May I be the first to offer my sympathies?"

"Keep your hands off me!" Susan cried. Condan had been shaking his head sadly, stroking her shoulder.

Johnny spoke, jabbing his finger against the scientist's frail chest with every word. "We're not going to be un-anythinged. We're getting out of here."

"Where will we go? I appreciate your feelings, young man. But it is now known all over the planet that two people answering to your descriptions have been selected for the lottery this month. If you resist, you'll be taken in time. But, naturally, resistance could be amusing. Have fun."

Johnny's head was swimming. He knew now that he'd expected a veritable godhood in the men of Tawroc. Instead, he'd found—this. But still, he wasn't ready to give up. He said, "Listen. We came here for help. We have a Chalice which you planted in our Solar System, but it breeds trouble. Few can use it, the rest are jealous. If you can let us know how to build another one, many other ones, our trouble will end, and—"

"I'm not so sure, Johnny," Susan told him. "Maybe then our troubles would just begin."

Shrugging, Johnny ignored her. "Can you do that? Can you teach us to construct another Chalice?"

"Naturally, young man." Condan nodded. "But it won't do you any good, you realize."

"Why not?"

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"You're for the lottery, remember. You'll be un-Chaliced. Then, if I remember my history correctly, you won't be able to travel between the stars."

"What do you mean, history? Don't you have space travel?"

"Whatever for? It's boring enough on the surface of Tawroc, but can you imagine how bad it would be with a lot of nothing all around you. There hasn't been a spaceship built here in a hundred thousand years. Well—ah, that would be the Lottery Committee."

The door-chimes had sounded, spilling their musical notes up and down the range of two scales. Johnny heard the angular housekeeper opening the door, saw four men enter.

"Where are they?" said one.

"Here." Condan pointed.

"Well, are you two ready?"

Susan smiled wanly. "Johnny, honey? Oh, Johnny, do you mind if I cuss?"

"N-no."

She turned to the Lottery Committee. "Go to hell."

And then she was giggling. The letdown had been tremendous—for now Johnny knew that Tawroc and its first humans could offer them no help. They'd come across the length of a galaxy and beyond for nothing, and now they must go back to their people and say they had lost. But for Susan it was worse. Her high-strung nature had plunged up and down like a wayward rocket, and her rage fringed on hysteria.

"Kill them, Johnny! I don't care how, I don't care—but kill them...." And then her head was against his shoulder and she was sobbing. "Kill them, kill them....Johnny, oo-ooo...."

Johnny wanted to comfort her, knew she'd need a lot of it. But there wasn't time. Condan knew what he was talking about, and if they were un-Chaliced, there'd be no returning, ever....

On the other hand—and suddenly Johnny's heart bobbed up into his throat and remained there—the machine had never told them how they could leave Tawroc!

Had, in fact, never told them they could leave at all.

The machine was only that—a machine. A thinking machine, perhaps, but completely objective, impartial. This world of Tawroc was different. Trouble was, *it didn't care*. Its people cared about nothing. The Chalice had made their ancestors too perfect, and the result was ennui. The whole world of Tawroc, almost, had a personality, if a negative one. It didn't care. It cared about nothing but its fantastic rules and regulations, grown monstrous through boredom.

Except for the lottery. The lottery mattered. The lottery said that Susan and Johnny must be un-Chaliced, hence exiled unwillingly on Tawroc. Johnny's head whirled hopelessly. There was no escape—nothing could be done. In his mind he called over and over again to the machine. *Help us, help us, help us....*

Unconcerned, indifferent, the four men of the Lottery Committee stalked forward. Johnny backed off into a corner, leading Susan by her hand. He wondered dimly if the machine, circling Canopus almost a hundred thousand light years away, somehow could see what was happening.

He wondered—and something seemed to chuckle within his head!

Raging, he ran forward, caught the first member of the Lottery Committee and hurled him dazed, against the wall. He plowed into the second, his fists flailing. Shaking his head, the third man removed one of the tubes

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from his coverall, pointed it.

Johnny felt a moment of pain almost too brief to register on his brain. He pitched forward on his face.

Susan followed him down, fell across him. The two injured members of the Committee shook themselves, and, together with their companions, lifted their unconscious burdens and stepped out into the street with them.

Condan waved goodbye and went back to his primitive laboratory.

The Lottery Committee had to wait half an hour before they found an opportunity to cross the street.

CHAPTER VIII

"ARE YOU all right, Johnny? Johnny? No, don't try to sit up."

"Stop worrying. We don't break easy. But I'm a little fuzzy on the details. What happened?"

"Probably, it was the same weapon that man Nabish used on the beach, only the effects lasted longer this time. We seem to be in some kind of a—a hospital."

There were two beds, one empty now. Johnny lay on the other, Susan bending over him anxiously. Aside from that, the room was empty, but it had that antiseptic look you associate with hospitals. There was one window of translucent glass, and dimly through it Johnny could see a metal grill-work on the outside, as effective as any bars. The door? Johnny looked at it and Susan tried it. By the time she was convinced it was locked, after much rattling and banging, Johnny sat up and smiled ruefully. "How would you like to be un-Chaliced?"

"Huh? How's that?"

"Un-Chaliced. That's what the Committee's for, remember? It's one hell of a lottery. Whoever happened to be with that man Condan—poof! He's it. So we win, kid. But I guess it really means we lose."

"That's ridiculous," said Susan, and stamped her foot. "If you think I'm going to wait here while they un-Chalice me—"

"I didn't say we'd just let them do it. Only right now we don't know what's going on. Maybe there's a quarantine period or something; anyway, we're all alone right now. Trouble is, this place is a pretty good prison."

"You still sound like you're ready to go to the slaughter without a fight. Do you realize what it will mean? If they do that, if they un-Chalice us, there'll be no leaving this place—ever. We won't be able to travel faster than light, and—"

"Sh! Let me think, will you?"

"Oh, you're just like that man, that Suuki!"

But Johnny paid her no attention. There was a way out, there had to be a way out. The machine had deposited them here, almost instantaneously. It had mouthed some gibberish about hyper-space or folded space or some such thing, but whatever it was, it couldn't be regarded merely as physical travel. In sub-space a man could accelerate faster than light, yes—but his speed still was something you could measure.

THE MACHINE, however, had another means of travel altogether. And, as far as Johnny knew, the only form of energy which moved without encountering the time-dimension at all was thought. Fine!

"We'll have to think our way out of here," he said.

"Ah, that's better. We'll have to think of a way out of here."

"I didn't say that. Not think of a way, just *think out*. Maybe if we con-

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centrate hard enough, the machine will hear us."

"Across eighty-six thousand light years?"

"Yeah, I know it sounds impossible. But they say thought doesn't diminish with distance, so all we have to hope is that the machine has a receiver."

"Okay. I'll grant that. But how do we know he—it—wants to help us?"

Johnny shrugged. "We can find out. I thought the machine was laughing at us before, when the Committee came for us. If I'm right, at least it means he knows what's going on."

"How do we think?"

"We just—think. We think, over and over again, *get us out of here.* Now."

And Johnny thought. He filled his mind with that thought alone, tried to squeeze everything else out of it. He felt the unheard words whirling inside his head, felt them banging, almost physically, against his skull. *Get us out of here...out of here...out!*

"It's silly," Susan told him, after a time. "How can we hope it will hear us? All that did was leave me with a headache."

"Well, keep right on trying."

Susan shook her head petulantly. There was a clicking sound, and then the door swung in toward them.

TWO MEMBERS of the Committee entered the room, followed by two young women garbed in pale lavender uniforms. Nurses, probably.

"It's only a minor operation," one of the men confided. "Nothing to worry about."

"Sure," said the other: "Tomorrow, you'll be as good as new. Minus your Chalice powers, naturally."

Silently, persistently, Johnny kept thinking his message at the machine. Hopeless? He wondered. Actually, it did not matter. This was their only hope, for they couldn't help themselves in any other way. They could not fight clear of the situation, not when the whole planet knew they had been picked in the lottery. Then, this alone remained. More than anything, Johnny knew they needed time.

"What kind of an operation is it?" he demanded.

"Minor, only minor, as I said. Merely a pre-frontal lobotomy. Surprising, isn't it, that the Chalice-powers have their seat in the unused front portion of the brain."

"Surprising? You understand it, don't you?"

"By the Almighty, no! The Chalice was invented so many millions of years ago that we've forgotten. Naturally, we don't have to use it any more, since everyone now has the power, and it breeds true. I suppose there is much we have forgotten over the eons, but then, with the Chalice, what does it matter?"

One of the nurses said: "Must I remind you that we're needed for other things in an hour? You'll have to operate now if you want us to help at all."

Shrugging, the man said that he would. The other nurse stepped forward, opened a satchel on Susan's unoccupied bed, began to remove some surgical instruments. She held a hypodermic needle up to the light, tested the plunger. "Shall I administer the anesthetic?"

"If you will."

Nodding, the nurse approached Johnny. "Your left forearm, please."

Johnny sat there.

"Your left forearm. You heard we were in a hurry! Please."

Johnny extended his arm, suddenly flexed it. The elbow struck hard at the hypodermic needle and the nurse

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dropped it, then watched as it shattered on the floor.

"Umm-mm," Johnny shook his head. "That was clumsy of me."

Get us out of here...out...out... out!

The nurse smiled vapidly. "Fortunately, we have another one."

Susan sighed. "That's swell. Oh, that's swell."

"Now," cautioned the nurse, "extend your arm slowly. Yes—that's the way."

Johnny waited until the last possible moment, then struck out. This time it was obvious, for the same accident couldn't happen twice. He watched the second vial shatter, then stood up. "There won't be any operation," he said quietly.

One of the Committee members frowned at him. "What do you mean?" frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"We're not submitting, that's all. Susan—watch those nurses!"

HURLING himself headlong from the bed, Johnny leaped upon the first Committee man. He felt his shoulder sink into the man's soft middle, and then they were down on the floor while the second man tugged at Johnny's back, trying to dislodge him. He had no opportunity to watch Susan, but he heard clearly the angry sounds of feminine battle, and the way Susan cursed lustily, in English, she didn't seem to be getting the worst of it.

The man below him was senseless, and Johnny rolled off him in one quick motion, bringing his feet up and catching the second man's thighs with them. Yelling, the man stumbled across the room.

Johnny got to his feet, cat-like. He saw that one of the nurses was stretched out in a sobbing heap on the bed while the other one backed away from Susan. Smiling grimly now, Johnny stalked forward, backing his adversary off into a corner.

The smile froze on his lips. The man held one of the tube-weapons, pointed it at him.

"This is as good as the hypo, anyway!" he cried, and fired.

The floor came up and slapped Johnny's head soundly. It was like the last time all over again, for as consciousness left him, he felt Susan tumbling down across his legs.

Something chuckled inside his head, and his last thought screamed inside his brain. *Get us out....*

Only, as consciousness left him completely, he knew it was hopeless.

THE ROOM did not look quite as he remembered it. For one thing, there weren't any beds. For another—

"I'll be damned!" he said.

And Susan laughed, "That's just what I thought when I awoke. Do you realize where we are?"

"Well, I'd be willing to bet that if we looked outside we'd see old Canopus flashing fire up in the sky."

"You're right, of course." Sibilant, metallic, the voice spoke with his head. The machine voice.

"You took us back?"

"No. I merely left this avenue of escape open for you. You brought yourself back, however. You see, I was not constructed so I could intervene in such matters. Your assumption was correct: it is mental energy which can fold space, provided a channel is open."

"I guess we go home now," Johnny said, dully. "We've failed. We found the first humans, sure—but they can't give us any help. They don't even understand the Chalice themselves!"

The machine voice purred laughter.

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"You certainly realize what that means?"

"I don't."

"And you have learned nothing?"

"I'm confused."

"Perhaps the female, then—"

But Susan said: "Don't look at me."

"Well, I was not built to supply the answer, although, naturally, I know the answer."

"What do you mean?" Johnny demanded.

"I mean you'll have to change your entire orientation toward the problem. But I cannot supply the missing data."

"Who can?"

"You."

"Me? I don't know! I told you I was confused."

"Remember my function, John Hastings? You can ask me questions. Anything."

It was eerie. They stood in a small room, on a spongy floor which yielded beneath their feet. A voice spoke to them within their heads. A sentient machine hovered all around them—on all sides, above, below. And what went on there could determine the fate of humanity.

Johnny pursed his lips, whistled softly. "Have you any ideas, honey?"

"My head feels just like a vacuum. You'd better do the thinking for us."

"In what way will we have to change our orientation?" said Johnny, addressing the machine again.

"Elementary. You sought the first humans, for you felt they could help you with your problem. You now are aware that they cannot."

"That's what I thought. But who can?"

"No one. No one can."

"But you said—"

"I am aware of what I said."

"But if no one can help us—wait a minute! Can we help ourselves?"

"Yes."

"Now we're getting somewhere. Then you mean we can find a way to produce another Chalice? Many of them...."

"No."

"Huh?"—Johnny had been off on the wrong track, and suddenly, he knew it. But it left him with nothing. "If we can't be helped from the outside, and if we can't help ourselves—"

"I did not say that."

"You certainly did!" Susan cried. "You just now said it."

I said you cannot construct another Chalice."

"Maybe he means we can do something else instead," said Susan.

"Maybe," Johnny agreed. "Maybe. All right, we'll try. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, that is what I, that is what I, that is what, is what, is what, is what, is what—"

"What's the matter now?" Susan wanted to know, as the voice droned on and on.

"He oils himself," Johnny told her, confidently. "He'll be back to normal in a minute."

AS IT TURNED out, half an hour passed before the machine returned to normal. Normal? No, not quite, for the unheard voice which still could give the suggestion of sound, was scratchy, hoarse, low.

"I near termination," it said.

"What does that mean?"

"I thought I was eternal. The thought is wrong, all wrong. Definitely, I am mortal. Were I flesh and blood, I would be on my death bed."

"You're dying?"

"Yes—*awk!* I perish."

"But you still haven't given us the answer."

"And, indeed, it is a shame, for I was created to serve man, yet it seems my time will come before I can help you."

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"How long?" Johnny wanted time—with time he might solve the problem.

"I—*awk*!—find it difficult to speak. In time, hours perhaps. But in questions, four."

"What does *that* mean?"

"I can answer four questions, and four only. I—*awk*!—will subside after that. And there was your first question...."...

"*Awk, awk, awk*....."

"Three more questions," Susan said wearily. "We can't waste words, Johnny. We've got to scoot on back to Earth with the answer."

A dying machine—if machines could die—holding the solution in its grasp. But as its gears and cogs slowed to a rasping stop, Earth's hope faded. For, if it ever came to open war between the Children and humanity, the forces unleashed would leave nothing but scorched, radioactive memories....

And war seemed inevitable, unless something—

"I know!" Susan screamed. "Ask him for the solution. Just ask that, what's the solution."

"He said he couldn't answer that."

"Did he? I don't remember. I'm going to ask."

"Don't."

She ignored him. "Give us the solution. What is the solution?"

"*Awk, awk*—I cannot answer that. Your questions must be more specific. Two—*awk*—questions remain."

Something shuddered beneath their feet. A dull, booming sound echoed and re-echoed in nameless, meaningless caverns below them. The spongy floor heaved, then plunged like the back of a submerging whale. Something rattled outside, then fell with a loud clattering.

Johnny hurtled up the stairs, peered out. "Hey! This whole world's falling apart."

IT WAS TRUE. Great fissures had opened in the smooth surface, huge boulders had been belched up and out of them, tumbling and crashing together on the now-uneven ground. The air was thick with the sharp, acrid odor of ozone. Off to the right, Johnny could see their ship. Two or three boulders had come down atop it but, aside from some dents, it appeared undamaged.

"We don't have much time," he said, returning to the room.

"He's—he's really *dying*, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"A machine—dying?"

"If a machine can live—and this baby does—then it can die. But I told you not to ask that question. Heck, forget it, kid—you meant well."

"I'm sorry." Susan puckered. "I guess I don't use my head any more than those idiots on Tawroc did. Funny, how a civilization can degenerate—"

Yes, funny how a civilization can degenerate. Of course, Johnny thought, human culture thrives on challenge. Successful response to adversity carry humanity up another step along the long path of civilization, and—

"Of course! We've been fools, Susan."

There was a rumbling and screeching below them. Johnny could picture great gears grinding and stripping one another, their giant teeth flaking off and spilling away like confetti.

"*Awk, awk, awk*...."

The walls shook. Dust sifted down, filled the air, made them cough. A fissure crawled down one wall, widened. The smell of ozone again, pungent, stronger this time. Sparks flashed in the fissure.

"Two questions, *awk!* Quickly. I perish."

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Susan dodged, stumbled, fell. A rock dug its way into the spongy floor, inches from her. "We're liable to perish with him if we don't hurry."

"I have it now, kid. I think I have it. Listen," Johnny addressed the dying machine, "you've said we have to reorient ourselves. We can't build another Chalice, let alone several of them. Point is, you don't think we ought to. Wait—that's not a question."

"*Awk*!"

"Johnny, something's burning down there."

Smoke poured through the fissure, slowly at first, but soon great billowing clouds of it puffed angrily into the room. "That smoke's hot," Johnny said, coughing and choking. "Cover your face and get down on the floor. It will rise toward the ceiling—I hope."

He took out a handkerchief, tied it around his neck, brought it up to cover his nose and mouth. He crouched, his eyes stinging, tears streaming from them.

"If you think you know the answer, Johnny, then let's get out of here before it's too late."

"No, we've got to be sure!"

"Two questions. *Awk, awk*, two."

"Here's how I figure it. Remember, the machines showed us other human worlds. There were two kinds. Some hadn't found their Chalices yet, and although their civilizations weren't tremendous, they looked happy. Others found the Chalice—and they had either destroyed themselves with war, or—"

"Or they were like Tawroc! But I don't get it."

"I do. The Chalice caused trouble, caused war. Naturally, everyone wanted it, and few could get it. Or, if there were enough of them, it was just as bad. On Tawroc, the first humans had everything too easy, thanks to the Chalice. They couldn't get hurt, they never were sick. Result: they were bored, remember? Life held nothing for them, and a whole cockeyed setup developed. Thanks to the Chalice, civilization went backward, not forward. In short, honey, the Chalice stinks!"

"But we—we're supermen! Look, we can—"

"I know what we can do. But I also know what we can't do, for the future. We can't survive as long as the Chalice is in our way. It'll either mean war and doom, or degeneration. Am I right?" He squinted through the smoke at the cracking, crumbling walls.

"Awk! Yes, yes, yes. You must destroy the Chalice. That way lies the salvation of your people. One question remains—"

THE FLOOR heaved. When it subsided for the moment, it was suspended, lop-sided, between the walls. The vault was black with smoke, the walls still trembled. Louder was the rumbling beneath their feet, and the metallic grinding shot up the scale until it bordered on the supersonic. And that was worse—for now it screamed inside their heads, as the voice had spoken there.

"The pain, *awk*—the pain!"

"One more question," Johnny said, coughing. "If we destroy the Chalice, will that take its powers from those who already have them? If it doesn't do that, it won't help us. I mean, is there something in the Chalice which must maintain its power in people? If there is, and—"

"*Awk, awk, awk*!"

"That's my question. When we destroy the Chalice, does that put an end to all supermen in the Solar System? Will they be normal again?"

"The answer—*awk*!—to your question is, to your question is, to

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your question, question, question, *awk, awk, aaaawwkkk!*"

Silence.

Except for the steady crashing of rock and metal—and the high-pitched shrieking.

Except for the crackling, hiss of electricity, as sparks flashed from the fissures.

Except for the voice which Johnny thought he heard feebly within his brain. "I perish, but my metal smiles on your venture. . . ."

"He's dead," Susan said.

It seemed the natural thing to say—he's dead. Not it's broken, but he's dead. For the machine had had a personality, and now the machine was dead.

Dead—with one question unanswered.

CHAPTER IX

HAND IN hand, they struggled up the rock-littered steps. Once a fissure opened beneath their feet, and for a long, agonizing moment, Susan clung to Johnny while his feet swung out over a deep pit. They dangled there until Johnny swung his legs and gathered momentum, then clawed his way clear to the other side, Susan perched on his back, whispering endearments in his ear because she thought this might be the last time for that—or for anything.

But, somehow, they made it to the ship, entered, got the engine going. By then the ground was tumbling and pitching chaotically, and angry flames licked up out of the fissures.

Smoke engulfed them, hiding their view of the world outside. But they knew the world was on the way out, and as they thundered off it, acceleration slamming them down, they saw the globe, splitting and spewing out huge chunks of twisted, broken machinery. The whole thing had been a giant brain and now the brain was dead. The world perished with it.

MONTHS later, they cleared subspace several million miles solar-north of the flat spatial disk of the Solar System. For the hundreth time, Johnny said:

"We don't know. We just can't tell. Destroying the Chalice won't help at all, maybe. It's got to destroy what we've got, too."

"It's funny how something can look like a blessing for so long and then wind up being a blight instead. I mean, we had such high hopes for the Chalice, for what it could do. Johnny, I'm afraid. What if we're wrong? We could be wrong."

"No. The machine couldn't lie. You heard what—*he* said."

"All right. If you say so. Still—"

"Still nothing. We've still got a man-size job ahead of us. We have a baby atomic here on the ship, sure, but we've got to plant it on the asteroid and make sure it goes off. It's a question of coming through fast, because the guardians can't stand the acceleration we can. So—here, watch."

Johnny flipped the regular space-drive lever all the way back, and they streaked down toward the asteroid belt. The sun gleamed brightly far off to the right, not a very large star, not very spectacular, But it was beautiful.

They weren't spotted until their ship had plunged into the zone of asteroids, until the alarm buzzer was shrilling its warning every few seconds, keeping Johnny busy at the controls dodging meteors.

And then their radio squawked: "Hallo, out there. You're in an unauthorized region, Solar 170, north 22-0-5. Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Johnny didn't answer. Susan sat there, looking very grim.

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"Reply! We'll fire on you if you don't."

Johnny turned the ship, slowly—for at their speed each turn was a torment of pain, acceleration slamming them back against the cushions like a huge sledge-hammer. But as he gritted his teeth, Johnny realized, triumphantly, the guardian ship couldn't follow. Unable to execute the turn, it would go off on a tangent, and by the time it returned for them, their job would be concluded.

Something left a fiery trail in the void behind them, plowing through the meteoric debris swift as light.

"They're firing!" Susan cried.

Johnny shrugged. They wouldn't have the chance for another shot, not off in the direction they were heading. He turned, looked through the rear port, saw the guardian ship streaking away, a full thirty degrees off course. "See?" he smiled. "Stop your worrying."

And then they neared the Black Asteroid, a lone, solitary, perfectly round globe. "Rig up that baby atomic," Johnny called over his shoulder as he began deceleration. "Landing in three minutes."

THE SURFACE of the sphere was as he had remembered it, black as space, glossy, a ball of jet hanging in the void.

This time, he hardly looked at the murals. They were wonderful works of art, and they'd been almost eternal, lasting the way they did through the eons. But it didn't mean much; the race which had created them had left its glory behind it, lost forever on the ancient startrails. What was left out on far Tawroc was not pretty, and it didn't do much good to look behind you, anyway.

You had to look ahead. And if the Chalice resulted only in evil, you forgot the Chalice. You destroyed it. You started from scratch.

Susan hadn't quite understood that on the long journey through sub-space. She'd said, "But if we destroy the Chalice, it means mankind will never be able to reach the stars."

And Johnny'd told her: "Maybe. Maybe not. No, we won't reach the stars this way, because they wouldn't be worth the price we'd have to pay. Perhaps man's a lazy creature if you make things too easy for him. Treat him rough, though, and he can do some mighty potent things."

"Well, what about the stars?"

"They don't matter, not for now. Humanity's got to be ready for them first. Last time, they tried—and failed. The result is Tawroc. A pretty noble attempt, I guess—but it led up a blind alley. The first humans got to the stars, sure; but they sacrificed their civilization for it. We won't do the same thing. No, we'll destroy the Chalice because now we know that it has to be destroyed. Maybe in some distant tomorrow, man will climb back to the stars again. But I'll tell you this, kid: he'll do it a different way, he'll do it with the sweat of his brow, not because he happens to have a device which makes him almost like a god. Trouble is, that godhood's only skin deep."

And now, in the vault below the asteroid's surface, the murals were just—murals. They told of no hidden glories and triumphs in some distant, unknown corner of space. The corner was Tawroc—and there was nothing glorious or triumphant about it at all.

"You got it ready?" Johnny demanded.

Susan nodded, pointing to the small metal sphere she'd placed in the Chalice itself. "This asteroid's only half a mile in diameter, isn't it? Yes? Well, that should destroy it completely. Only—I'm nervous, Johnny. This is the end of—of everything they

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dreamed of on Tawroc, an age ago. It doesn't seem right. . . ."

"It is right. It's the only way. And don't be nervous about a little thing like that. Wait till we tell the Children what we did to their Chalice. Wait till they find out for themselves—*if* our plan works."

They ran upstairs—up the nine stairs for the last time. The last time, ever, for the nine stairs which had waited patiently five millions of years for human feet to use them. . . .

MOMENTS later, they blasted off. The baby-atomic was radio-controlled, and Johnny waited until they had streaked clear of the asteroid belt entirely. Once a ship came up behind them and gave them chase, but Johnny cut off sharply at an angle, and acceleration remained on their side.

Now they were clear, and Mars' ruddy light streamed in through the fore-ports. Beyond it was the bright green Earth-star and, near it, the small, pale speck of the moon.

"We'll be losing our powers," Susan said. "We won't be supermen any longer."

"No, and we won't be chased and hounded and fought with, either. But don't get me wrong. This isn't like giving up at all. Remember, we were only supermen skin deep. Oh, you couldn't see it yet, for sufficient time hadn't passed. It showed on Tawroc, though. Don't you forget this, kid: man has got to climb to heaven the hard way. With work. He grows soft if things are handed to him on a silver platter.

"We'll have to explain that to Pop, to Suuki, to all the rest. It won't be easy, but we can do it. Only, I want you on my side, damn it!"

"I—I'll always be on your side, Johnny."

He kissed her, then pressed the radio-control button.

Something flared briefly in space behind them, a quick, mushrooming explosion that momentarily dimmed the stars. Johnny didn't say a word, reached into his pocket instead, withdrawing a pen-knife, flicking it open with his thumb.

Still wordless, he ran the keen edge across his index finger. Blood welled up in the cut, ran down the finger to his palm. He tried to staunch the flow with his handkerchief, but nature took its own time about such things, and the blood did not stop flowing until a scab began to form.

"See?" Johnny held his hand aloft, waving it furiously. "There was something which had to be maintained by the Chalice all along. None of us are supermen any more—not since that explosion."

"So it's the end of everything."

"Sure, the end. But the beginning, also. No five-million-year-old gift is going to make supermen out of us, Susan, not in a way that will last. We'll have to do it ourselves, together. The whole race can become supermen someday—together. Working for it."

Frowning, Susan took the knife, jabbed it against her palm. "Look! Look, see? Me too! I'm normal. I'm—"

Johnny cut off the rest of it with a kiss. But it was a loud kiss, the kind a man might give his wife, half-affectionately, half from force of habit, after a dozen years of marriage.

"Uh-uh," said Susan. "Not that way at all." And she lodged her arms firmly behind his neck, bringing her lips close.

"Say it," said Johnny, and laughed.

"Say what?"

"It's not the end, darn it!"

"It isn't, Johnny. Oh, it isn't. It's the beginning. . . ."

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Giant of Ganymede

by ROSS ROCKLYNNE

"WELL," the big man said as he came into the nursery, "looks like the flower business has gone to pot!" His crooked smile showed poor teeth—and poor humor, too, Jimmy Tracer thought to himself. Jimmy Tracer was a serious young man and a horticulturist with years of experience. That pun had whiskers.

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So you think being a florist is a dull job? Not if it's on another world!

"It always does drop off," he murmured politely, "when Callisto is on the Sunless side of Jupiter. I didn't expect any florists' representatives until next week. Help you off with your bulger?"

"Naw," the other man grinned. He unbuckled the helmet of his "bulger," let it drop over his shoulders. "I'm not any florist's representative and the

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business I've got with you can take a minute."

Something snapped in his eyes; maybe something unpleasant. His massive, stubbled jaw moved disjointedly back and forth as he got the bad taste of space-suit air out of his mouth.

"Here's my problem. I've got a seven-passenger space-ship out on your landing-field and I had an accident. A short circuit on the Wittenberg power-cables. Burned all the *keoloo*-rubber insulation off, it did. I want some *keoloo*-rubber."

"That's too bad. I don't happen to have any."

"Listen. I need some *keoloo*-rubber. I happen to know you got every plant that grows in the Saturnian or the Jovian System. You've got *chirdo* from Io, and glass plants from Iaptus, and big, creeping, living snake-plants in an ammonia bath from the surface of Jupiter itself. You've got jigsaw-hoppers from Encelephadus, *quina* from Titan and bugle-beans from Titan."

"And death-mats from Davy Jones," finished Jimmy Tracer firmly. "But I haven't got any *keoloo*-trees."

"That's impossible!" the big man suddenly shouted. "*Keoloo*-trees grow anywhere."

"Do you know anything about *keoloo*-trees?"

"I don't know a damn thing about 'em! All I know is—"

"That you need some *keoloo*-rubber. Well, before you can tap a *keoloo*-tree, sir, the tree has to be at least two-hundred-fifty feet high. And before I could have any *keoloo* here, I'd have to build a nursery for them over three-hundred feet high, because they grow fast. And before you can go to the expense of building a nursery like that, you have to make lots of money from the nursery business, and you know, sir, the market for Jovian and Saturnian flora is—limited. That's all, sir."

Jimmy Tracer's tone was grim, and he indicated that the man had shouted at him once too often.

The other's chest heaved. Then slowly his faced cleared. He looked at Jimmy with respect.

"You're a cool one. Giving me the shake-down. Okay. Maybe there's no *keoloos* on Callisto, but there are some on the other Jovian worlds. Not far from here. I can get there on my auxiliary rockets. You go along with me and show me where there're some *keoloos* and tap 'em for me. And I'll *give* you enough money to build a *keoloo* nursery!"

Jimmy Tracer grabbed at the glasses on his studious face. He took them off, and blinked at the other man.

"I'd have to take your word for that?"

"Word, hell! I'll sign a check!"

He bent over a glass case with a check book and pen. He scrawled a signature which looked like Wilbur Hall. There was something about that name . . . but Tracer couldn't place it. Hall shoved the check at him, and the horticulturist filled in an amount of money exactly equal to that necessary to build a *keoloo* nursery. He looked at the check grimly. In another few days Dorothy Bryant and her father would land with a party of business friends on Callisto. Dorothy's father would make insulting remarks about the paltry living a planetary horticulturist made; not enough of a living to take care of his daughter the way she was accustomed to being taken care of by a doting father. Then, Jimmy Tracer thought savagely to himself, he'd show J. S. Bryant, owner of the Inner Planets Space-Transit Manufacturing Company, just how much a sap of a planetary horticulturist could make. He'd show him this check.

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And then . . . *please God* . . . maybe J. S. would pick out the Jovian instead of the Saturnian system of worlds for a site on which to build his new space-ship manufacturing factory!

JIMMY TRACER'S Callistonian nurseries were not exactly a "going concern." He had his troubles. But there was a tenacity about him which did not show in his lank, rather flatly built body. He did know where there were some *keoloo* trees, because of this tenacity. The facts are these:

Just as there was a mal-distribution of industrial development on the planet Earth all throught most of the Twentieth Century, so in this century was there a mal-distribution throughout the Solar System. The minor planets, Mars, Earth, the Moon, Venus, Mercury, and one or two large asteroids, had been exploited by the large ore refining, machine-tool, and space-ship manufacturing concerns. Modern improvements were magically transforming these worlds into latter-day Babylons and Romes—paradises of comfort and sane living. Not so the Outer Planets, where pioneers hopelessly battled conditions that could be improved were it not for the tremendous distances which existed between them and the source of modern technological equipment. The Inner Planets did not even bother to draw off more than a fraction of the tremendous natural resources the Outer Planets could provide them. This made the Plutonian, Uranian, Saturnian and Jovian Worlds the neglected rim of man's empire. The people, those who had thought to better their lot, those who had faith in the coming industrial expansion of the Outer Planet frontiers, were stricken with poverty, and the tragedies that occurred in connection with that great faith will never be completely written.

Jimmy Tracer was one of those who had had faith, and his struggle to build and equip his nurseries will never be written either. Yet, having accomplished the impossible, he dared to look into the future. Someday—*someday!*—the industries would move out to Jupiter and Saturn, and farther. Space-ships would be built right here in the Jovian System! And space-ships needed *keoloo*-rubber for insulation purposes—needed plenty of it. Jimmy Tracer took his cue, got a land-grant from the Martian government, and started a *keoloo* tree plantation on one of the Jovian Worlds.

Two years after the first saplings had pushed through the soil, Dorothy Bryant had written Jimmy Tracer a letter, suggesting vaguely that her father was thinking of maybe building an ore-refining and space-ship manufacturing out "in that neck of the woods. He'd spank me if he even *thought* I'd mentioned it to you, Jimmy darling, because it's a deep-dyed secret. I simply must tell you though, Jimmy precious. You won't ever get ahead mothering all those horrible, silly plants in your nurseries—well, go ahead and get mad again, but you *won't!* Here's what I was thinking. You know that territory out there so well, that maybe, if and when Dad does decide to industrialize the Jovian Worlds, maybe you can convince Dad into giving you a good superintendent's job in the factory—maybe an expeditor's job. Then you can make enough money so Dad won't be so much against our marriage. . . ."

Jimmy had torn up that letter, savagely. Then, just last week, Dorothy had written him again, saying that she was leaving with her mother and father and a party of business friends and they would stop by on Callisto to see Jimmy. The big news was that J. S. Bryant was definitely looking for a site for a

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space-ship factory, but so far he was undecided between the Saturnian and the Jovian System. . . .

Please God, thought Jimmy, *make it the Jovian System, because then I can supply J. S. with all the keoloo rubber he'll want!*

JIMMY straightened and showed the check to the big man in the space-suit. Hall barely looked at it.

"That's fine, fine. Any amount. This is important to me. What satellite do we set our course for?"

"Ganymede. . . ."

Jimmy walked across the airless space between the big flat dome that covered the nurseries, toward his landing field. He had given instructions to his assistant to take care of things until he got back . . . oh, maybe in three or four days. Hall walked beside Jimmy. Both had their space-suits zippered up, their helmets buckled down.

The airlock door of Hall's small, blunt-nose, meteor-scarred ship was being held open by one of Hall's crew. Jimmy looked at the man's face and didn't like the gimlet, cruel eyes. He hesitated, appalled by the panic he felt.

He didn't hesitate long. Hall took his arm in a grip as strong as a Jovian suction pump. He helped Hall into the ship, through the airlock. They walked down an echoing corridor, halted before a solid metal door.

Hall was looking at Jimmy through the gloom. "These are your quarters, Tracer. Might as well take your space-suit off." Jimmy did, slowly.

The member of the crew with Hall opened the door and then Hall grinned down at Tracer.

"Sucker!" he said. Then he roared with laughter. *"Sucker!"*

The door opened all the way, and Hall shoved Jimmy inside . . . shoved him so forcefully he went slamming against the opposite wall. The door clicked shut. Jimmy was knocked half unconscious, his brain scalded with incredible thoughts, with horror at a sudden revelation. But it couldn't be! Groggily, he felt his mind focussing, but his body jogged against the wall again as the ship's rockets thundered through the metal plates, and the ship plowed with rapid acceleration toward heaven. . . . Then he slumped and he felt the slow tears of self-disgust forming under his closed eyelids. Somehow, for a reason he didn't know, he had been—tricked!

WHEN Jimmy Tracer finally had the nerve to face the living world again, he saw that he wasn't alone in the cabin. There were four other men—men dressed in tweeds and worsteds and serges—men in correct business attire. They were sitting glumly in chairs and looking at Jimmy. Jimmy's widening eyes fastened on one distinguished, grey-headed man who had carried the handsomeness of his youth into middle-age.

"J.S.," Jimmy said blankly. *"Dad!"*

"Don't call me 'dad'," J. S. Bryant said coldly, his hands sunk deep in his pockets, his long legs spread out to their full length as he glared down at Jimmy. "I've told you I wouldn't let you marry my daughter if you were the Last Man, and the race needed a fresh start. I double-mean it now. *Sucker!* So you let Wild Bill Hall take you in."

"No!" Jimmy chattered. "No! I'll show you. I've got a check—a big check, signed by Wilbur Hall. It's—"

"A rubber check," said J. S. "Signed by Wild Wilbur Hall."

"It can't be," Jimmy panted. "He wrote me a check. I'm going to show him where there's some *keoloo*-rubber trees on Ganymede, so he can—"

He stopped when he saw all four men

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looking at him with hatred.

"You poor sap," said J. S. Bryant in a soft voice. "Let me tell you a story. We—these three men and Dorothy and her mother and a maid in the next room—"

"Dorothy's here? In the next cabin?"

"Dorothy's here. We were all about seven hours out from Callisto, making good speed in my yacht. Wild Bill Hall—look him up in the police records of eight different planets if you live through this—rammed our ship, killed the captain and the chief engineer. Sparks managed to get a radio message off and a reply from the nearest police cruiser before they killed him. Wild Bill Hall took us aboard his ship and started out for his hide-out on Pluto. He knew and we knew the police were following him, had him stuck on their detectors. Once he gets to Pluto he's safe, and he can demand fancy ransoms for us, meanwhile cutting off our fingers and toes and sending them back parcel post to show the authorities he means business."

"That can't be true," Jimmy whispered.

J. S. Bryant said savagely, "Sometimes I think *you* can't be true. Dumb people like you couldn't exist. I'll tell you why. About three hours ago, when they opened the door to give us something to eat, we dragged the pirate inside, shoving the tray of food in his face. I grabbed his flare-stick and made a break for it. *I* know how these ships are made. I got as far as the anatherm tube next to the engine room, and I sprayed the electric connection with a beam of solid heat. Short circuit. I burned all the *keoloo*-rubber insulation off the gravitonic-power cables. *Keoloo* is the only substance that will keep gravitons from leaking back into the interior of atoms, where they came from. Ergo, Wild Bill Hall had to travel on his auxiliary rockets until he could get some *keoloo*. They didn't kill me, because I'm worth money to them. We were very happy, Jimmy Tracer, because we knew the police cruiser following us would catch up and we'd all live happily ever after. We were happy until Wild Bill Hall pulled a sucker trick on a Callistonian horticulturist I wish I didn't know!"

ONE of the other men in the room squirmed and looked a little shame-faced. "Please, John," he said apologetically. "You're being hard on the boy. He didn't know why Hall wanted the—"

J. S. jumped to his feet, throwing his hands in the air. "All right, all right!" he shouted. "So I'm being hard on him. You've all gone against me, ever since this trip started. You men want Jupiter—and I say Saturn! Well, I continue to say Saturn, and Saturn it's going to—"

He stopped, clamping his lips. He drew a deep breath, and stepping to the wall, he rapped on it with his knuckles.

"Martha!" he called sharply. "Your prospective son-in-law is here!"

"Jimmy!"

The muted squeal of delight came not from J.S.'s wife but from his daughter, Dorothy. Jimmy Tracer momentarily forgot himself and his incredible shame. He scrambled to his feet, pressing his body against the cold metal panels of the cabin wall.

"Dorothy!" he begged. "Say you're all right—that—that—"

"Of course I'm all right," she cried. "Oh, Jimmy—Jimmy, darling! It's been so long since—" She stopped suddenly, and when she spoke again it was in a whimper Jimmy could hardly hear through the wall. "But Jimmy, this—this means you're a prisoner,

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too. . . ."

Jimmy Tracer's tongue clove to his mouth. He looked appealingly at J.S. Bryant.

J.S. said irritably, "Go ahead and tell her—the truth. The scatter-brain will keep on loving you anyway." He sat down in his chair and rested his head disgustedly on the heels of his hands.

Jimmy wrenched the story out as if he were the accused on the witness stand, facing a whole court-room. Afterwards, Dorothy was silent for a long minute. When she spoke, her voice was determined.

"Ganymede is a large planet, Jimmy. Wild Bill Hall still doesn't know exactly where the *keoloo* trees are located. Well, Jimmy Tracer, when he asks you, you simply don't tell him!"

Her voice rose brightly, but there was an ashen pallor on Jimmy's face. He writhed internally. The four men in the room were looking at him with a renewed hope.

"She's right," breathed a short, dumpy man—Vice President Fahenstock of the Inner Planets Space-Ship Co., Jimmy later found out. "That's our only chance. Hold Hall off as long as you can. Even if he—tortures you for the information."

The four men were suddenly electrified, on their feet, crowding around Jimmy. J.S. Bryant's flinty eyes bored into Jimmy's for a long moment, as if searching for something deeply buried in his personality, a strength, perhaps, a superhuman endurance that would enable him to stand against Hall. Whether he found it or not, he gave no indication J.S.'s hand dropped to Jimmy's shoulder.

"We're depending on you, Jimmy." The acid sternness in his voice did not abate. "This may turn into a matter of life and death . . . and whether we live or die, may rest with you."

It was almost as if he were trying to induct some of his own rigid strength of soul into Jimmy, the way he gripped his shoulder; almost as if he were trying to tell Jimmy that he *could* be a kind father-in-law if only Jimmy. . . .

Jimmy took off his glasses. He always had more courage to say his mind when the people he was talking to blurred a little. And he had to have courage, courage to meet Hall as well as to stand up against these men who were accusing him of more than he was guilty of.

"It's all right for you men to talk about torture," he said slowly. "You don't know what it is. I was captured by Ionian bush natives once, while I was scraping a parasitic fungus off one of their sacred *cir* trees. I fought my way free after two days of periodic torture. . . ."

He stopped. The four men were seated, their eyes averted from him. They'd had their say. They'd put it up to him. Jimmy sat down against the wall, his lips pursed, the freckles bridging his slightly reddish, pinched-up nose showing against the paleness of his face. He kept his glasses off. . . .

CONVERSATION died for the next three hours. The men had nothing more to say to him, and certainly he and Dorothy couldn't talk about the things they'd like to talk about when there were so many people to listen. The ship rushed through space, across ten million miles of void that separated Callisto from Ganymede. It was when Jimmy felt the blunt-noser decelerating that he knew the half-way mark of the trip had been reached. He almost knew to the dot when Hall's men would come for him and he was standing up when they burst open the door.

"You," said one of them, and shoved

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Jimmy out into the corridor before he could answer Dorothy's sudden cry. He was urged down a companionway, past the howling Wittenbergs, through the engine room, and then up into the control room, where Wild Bill Hall was standing fork-legged behind his seated navigator. The tremendous bulk of the man, limned against the broad view-plate which showed the gray circle of Ganymede ballooning toward them, grew a knot in Jimmy's stomach.

Hall turned around as his men hustled Jimmy Tracer in. His big-pored face grinned mockingly.

"Ah, the plant expert!" He grabbed Jimmy's arm and held him so he was looking through the view-plate. "That's Ganymede, Tracer! But Ganymede's a big place. Now you can tell us where the *keoloo* trees are! Latitude and longitude."

"I'm not going to tell you," said Jimmy.

"I gave you a check," said Wild Bill Hall, looking down at Jimmy, his expression beginning to grow brutal.

"A rubber check," said Jimmy fiercely.

Wild Bill Hall said, shoving Jimmy away, "Okay, boys. Go to work on him!"

The two men who had brought Jimmy in went for him. Jimmy met them, his eyes pinpoints. He got a headlock on one that turned into an Oriental strangle-hold. The man made a gawking sound, and Jimmy threw him over his shoulders. The other man came up behind Jimmy, kicked him between the shoulder blades and Jimmy smashed face first against the bulkhead. He fell, his nose washing his face in his own blood.

Wild Bill Hall held his men off at this point. Hall said sharply, "Give up, Tracer. You may know yoga and judo but you can't stand against five men."

Jimmy Tracer dragged himself up the side of the bulkhead to a standing position. His eyes were blazing on Wild Bill Hall, blazing and blurred. Wild Bill Hall towered over him, and Jimmy thought savagely of a big *keoloo* tree. That's how big Hall seemed then. His hands were on his hips, and he was leaning forward a little—leaning forward and curving, the way a *keoloo* curves when you leave the gate in too—

SOMETHING clicked in Jimmy's brain, the way an alarm clock clicks when it isn't set to go off. But it wasn't two seconds after that before the bell rang. He kept his face the way it was, blazing with resentment, but his thoughts were racing down another channel.

"I'll tell," he panted, wiping his face. "You've got me. Latitude 30° 58′ 17″ N., Longitude 170° 22′ 42″ E. You'll recognize the place. Set in a valley. Little three-room cabin I built. Land near the cabin—I planted the first *keoloo* trees there. But—but—" suddenly his face was mingling sweat with claret "—do me the favor of—"

"Repeat that latitude and longitude again, Tracer."

Jimmy repeated it and Wild Bill nodded. "Okay. Maybe you've given us the right dope. We'll find out. What favor?"

"Keep me here in the control room with you. I—I promised them back in the cabin that I wouldn't give you the location—"

"Take him back!" ordered Hall. "He's trying to pull a trick, maybe, and I can't take a chance."

They hauled Tracer away and seconds later he was thrust into the cabin. His face turned red as four men rose as one. He needed to say nothing.

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Fahenstock pulled out his watch. His tone was cutting. "You've been gone ten minutes. You didn't give them a chance to break you down, even. To use the vernacular, you—ratted."

J. S. Bryant suddenly seemed like an old man. He sat down unsteadily. "I'm disappointed in you, boy." His eyes were averted.

Jimmy Tracer's chest heaved. "You men have to listen to me," he panted. "I've got an idea—a good idea, and if—"

"Never mind, son," said one of the other men gently, wearily. "Sit down. I guess—I guess maybe you couldn't help yourself, a little fellow like—forget it." Silence came, and four men sat in various attitudes of dejection. Jimmy Tracer walked with leaden steps across the cabin. He suddenly doubted his own mind. Maybe it wouldn't work. *Maybe?* Why, it couldn't work. He was a fool to think he was big enough to get the best of Hall—

"Jimmy?" It was Dorothy's voice, timid with fear of what he would tell her.

Something broke loose in Jimmy. "Yes! I told them!" he shouted. "Now you know it. You can go ahead and hate me. Who cares!" He sank to a sitting position, burying his face in his hands, inwardly tortured. Dorothy said nothing more, but Jimmy could almost hear her perplexed sigh.

THEY came for Jimmy again when the ship sloughed to a gentle landing on the soft humus of Ganymede's forest soil. Two of the pirates led him outside the ship, where Wild Bill Hall was standing with the rest of his men, looking appreciatively at the brittle, waist-high forest growth, at the towering, branchless, geometrically vertical columns of the *keoloo* trees. Everybody was without space-suits. There was ten pounds of pressure to the square inch on Ganymede. There was oxygen. The air was cold, but this planet, heated in some degree from its molten interior, was livable.

Wild Bill Hall breathed deeply, and stretched his giant arms.

"Well, we ain't got much time to waste," he ruminated lazily. "How long before we can tap enough *keoloo* rubber to insulate the power cables, Tracer?"

"It'll take a full day—twenty-four hours," said Jimmy firmly. He adjusted his glasses. It was dark and gloomy on Ganymede, because Jupiter was hanging on the horizon, and hardly threw off more light than a half-Moon. You couldn't even see the tops of the tallest *keoloos*.

"*What?*" Hall's mouth fell open angrily. "That's impossible. Lord, Tracer, don't try to pull any fast ones on *me*. We've got cops on our trail."

Wild Bill Hall's navigator interposed thoughtfully, "Nope, Chief. Our detectors put the police a couple days away—that's how I figure it."

Hall was relieved. "That's good. That's plenty good. But I still want to know why it'll take twenty-four hours, if we tap all these trees around here, to collect enough—"

"Because I doubt that there's more than one or two trees that are ready for tapping. Your navigator can check on the height of these trees by triangulation. There's only one tree that's over two hundred and fifty feet. When they get that tall they begin to manufacture a growth hormone—auxin—in terrific quantities. They begin growing at the rate of a couple feet a day. When they begin to get their surplusage of auxin, they begin to manufacture *keoloo*-latex—that's the raw sap. You mix the latex with sulphuric acid and it turns into pliable rubber."

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"Wait a minute." Hall turned to his men—the four members of his crew. "Any of you men know anything about *keoloo* trees?"

There was no answer. Hall said grudgingly, "Okay, Tracer, we'll have to take your word for all this. But I'm warning you if the police catch up with us, you'll die first—and you won't be happy while you're dying. Go on."

Tracer felt sick at the brutal coarseness on Hall's face. He continued, his voice wavering, "I'm telling you the truth. I planted the first *keoloos* near the cabin. There's the cabin over there. I planted the first seedlings at the rate of one a day. When the *keoloos* get four hundred feet high, they don't give enough latex to pay, and you have to —ah—chop 'em down. This is a one-man plantation and I don't have enough money to hire people to help me, and one *keoloo* a day is all I can manage alone."

"Okay," Hall rapped out. "You think you're a professor, Tracer? In other words, the *keoloo*-rubber business ain't any snap." He roared, and his men politely guffawed along with him.

Tracer grinned a little sourly. "I'm just giving you the main facts. I've only got one tree I can tap. Besides that, I've only got one gate."

"Gate?"

"A tap, a faucet—a hydrant. It's in the cabin."

"Bring him along to the cabin, men."

JIMMY TRACER was proud of this cabin. He had built it himself out of brushwood. It had a built-in fireplace, and upswinging beds, and good looking furniture. It was cozy and it was warm. He sighed heavily, and went to his tool-chest. He extracted the gate, and Wild Bill Hall plainly showed his suspicions when he rummaged around in the chest for another gate.

"You won't find another gate," Jimmy said dolefully. "The sources of technological equipment are all on the inner planets. It costs a fortune to pay the freight charges on tools. I've got a big latex pot in the corner though—brand-new. I figure it'll hold exactly enough latex to coat the gravitonic-power cables. But you'll have to wait until the pot is full before the latex is any good. It gets thicker as it comes down from the top of the tree. This is a standard-size latex pot."

The men, even Hall, were hanging on his every word. They saw before them, a lank, thinly built man with a pinched-up serious face, and slightly red-rimmed eyes. They saw in his mannerisms and in the dreary tone of voice an indication not only that Jimmy realized he was powerless, but that an inner something, the spirit of the man, had died. And they grinned at this. They knew Jimmy's connections with the prisoners they had kidnapped, and they knew what Jimmy's sweetheart was thinking of him for collaborating with them . . . and what the other people were thinking.

Jimmy was urged toward the door of the cabin. He twisted, looked with imploring expression at Hall.

"Listen," he said weakly. "I'm helping you men out of a tight spot, and I think in return you should do me a favor. It's my right. I built this cabin myself and there's a stream of good water running right under it, and I've got a pump in the kitchen. I've even got a water heater. I've got all kinds of canned goods and good canned drinks and I've got liquor—plenty of it over in that cabinet."

Hall's twisted smile flashed. "Liquor!" he exploded.

"Now wait a minute," Jimmy said

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hurriedly. "The women in the ship have been crammed in that little cabin of theirs for over half a day. They must feel pretty terrible. I was thinking maybe you could let the women use the cabin, and you men can sleep outdoors—"

"*Us* sleep outdoors!" Hall chuckled, rocking on the balls of his feet. Then he raised his hand as if to hit Jimmy. "You fool, you think I was born yesterday? Got some sort of a trick in mind, eh? Hell. Remember this: I've stayed on top as long as I have because I don't trust nobody. We'll use the cabin and to hell with your women. Now get along to that *keoloo*-tree!"

Jimmy let his shoulders slump in defeat, but he had to lower his head to hide the shine in his eyes. He led the men outside the cabin. He blinked until he saw the only *keoloo*-tree he could tap. It was about a hundred-fifty feet distant. Jimmy walked with wobbling step straight toward the *keoloo*—a geometrically straight line, a line that *had* to be straight!

Fifteen minutes later, the gate had been forced through the rough outer rind of the *keoloo* and had sunk deep into the pulp interior. The pirates breathed deeply, fascinated, as Jimmy opened the gate and a red, syrupy liquid descended in a thin stream into the latex pit. Above them, the *keoloo* speared to the sky, losing itself.

Wild Bill Hall exulted. He ordered one of his crew to take Jimmy back to the ship. There was a minor argument as the man thus ordered protested.

"Yeah," he flared. "An' while I'm standing guard in the ship you others will be guzzlin' all that liquor down.

Hall said coldly, "Get going. I'll send a relief in six hours. And don't the rest of you men think we're going to spend time getting drunk—not with any police behind us."

JIMMY walked away with his guard behind him. Jimmy walked a little to the left of the cabin, and deliberately blundered into a brambly patch of *harga*-berry bushes. While his ill-humored guard was snarling his curses at Jimmy for being so clumsy, Jimmy tore off whole handfuls of the *harga*-berries and stuffed them in his pockets.

In the ship, Jimmy set his lips, and paid no attention to the hostile stares Bryant and his business associates bent on him. Without a word, he started to work. He was tired of having to justify himself to these men. He first of all took out a pen-knife and hacked away at his own rather long, unkempt black hair. He placed the seven-inch lock carefully on the floor. He took out a handkerchief and cut three or four strips away the length of the handkerchief.

Without realizing it, the men were staring at him in fascination.

J. S. Bryant uneasily cleared his throat, and Jimmy's head shot up.

"Don't ask any questions, Mr. Bryant, because you can go to—" He stopped, eyes blazing. His tone was quieter, but bitter when he resumed. "You've always told me without mincing any words what you thought of a planetary horticulturist. You've never had anything but contempt for me. Don't say you haven't. Well, before this is over, you're going to come to me and you're going to apologize. You'll see. You'll learn a thing or two about planetary horticulturists that your type would never even suspect."

He continued with his work. He doubled the lock of hair over a pencil, letting the ends stick out from the pencil. He used the strips of cloth to bind the hair on the pencil and he had a fairly serviceable brush. Next he took the crystal glass case of his watch. He dropped the *harga*-berries in a pile.

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He cracked the *harga*-berries at the seams and a fiery bright blue liquid began to fill up the bowl of the glass-case.

The men were on their feet now, entirely forgetting themselves. Jimmy dipped the brush in the fiery blue liquid and began to paint a blue rectangle four feet deep on the locked door of the cabin. After the rectangle was completed, he lighted a cigarette and walked softly, springily, up and down in the cabin's quiet, his face pale with nervousness. Fifteen minutes passed. Jimmy took his pen-knife, then, scraped along the blue rectangle. A bluish granular substance came away. When he was finished, the borders of the rectangle were perhaps a sixty-fourth of an inch deep.

J. S. Bryant took one look at that, one look at Jimmy, and then quietly dropped to his knees and began to crack *harga*-berries into the watch case.

"I remember this stuff," he said casually, as he worked. "One of the new etching fluids. Amalgamates with metal. Didn't know it grew on Ganymede, though."

"Yes, sir," said Jimmy huskily.

"Here you are, boy," said one of the other men, rather sheepishly handing Tracer the *harga*-juice.

Jimmy painted the rectangle again. He had desperately resolved to let these men eat themselves up with curiosity, but he couldn't keep it in. He had to let them know, part of it, anyway. "It'll take hours to eat away a hole through the door so we can get out. We'll have to fight our guard. But it may be that my other plan will hatch before this one. If only Hall and his men stay in the cabin—if they don't notice what's happening to the *keoloo* tree. In sixteen hours, a few minutes less, if it works out the way I want it to, we won't ever have to worry about Hall again. I'm worried though. I hoped they'd get drunk, but I don't think they will. We better take our chance to escape here now. Then we have to get close to the cabin to make sure none of them escape when the *keoloo* falls."

J. S. Bryant grudgingly asked no questions. But his eyes twinkled.

"Okay, boy," said Fahenstock softly. "You know what you're up to. You crack the whip." The other men nodded gravely.

LONG hours passed. Jimmy slept once, the others working on the door. Twice he talked with Dorothy. He couldn't tell her what was brewing, because he'd have to talk too loud. But his heart leaped at what she said.

Her voice was miserable. "I'm sorry about all the arguments we had about your—plants, Jimmy, dear. I was going to stay on Callisto and help you, and make up for everything. . . ."

Success came, after seventeen hours. Their guard brought their rations once. He shoved the tray in and backed out, holding his flare-stick. Later, when the rectangular panel swung away as if on a hinge, Jimmy was the first one through.

He went padding down a corridor, straight toward the control room. They surprised their guard reading magazine. He was disarmed, gagged, and bound before he knew what was happening. They took his flare-stick, but found no other weapons.

They left the ship, five shadows in Ganymedan darkness, looking toward the brightly lit cabin. Laughter and loud talk came from the cabin, and the clink of glasses. But it was not drunken laughter. Hall was too wise in the game to let his men get out of control.

"We're no match for them," the pudgy man named Fahenstock said

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throatily.

"That *keoloo*-tree is, though," Jimmy said savagely. "I expected it to fall before this, but it's liable to go any minute. Look! See how the tree is curving straight toward the cabin? It can't take much of that curvature. It's own weight will break it off near the base. The tree is ten feet in diameter. It'll crush and kill—"

"I can't see the tree curving," Bryant said doubtfully.

"It's curving, all right. It's too dark to see it, I guess."

Jimmy held the flare-stick. He wanted to get closer to the cabin. He crept forward. Jimmy spoke slowly. If anybody escaped the cabin when the tree fell they would have to jump him.

"But I don't see *why* the tree should fall," Fahenstock wheezed irritably. "And I don't think we should get this close. We're—"

Somebody *sshed* him. They moved through the chill air, across the brittly crunching humus—and suddenly Jimmy felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. Whether it was intuition or just a sense of hearing which told him somebody was behind them he would never know. He started to whirl, but a voice lashed out,

"All right, misters—*hands up!*"

Jimmy froze, a terrible incredulity growing in him. That this should happen at the last minute was maddening. He faltered but a gun prodded him agonizingly. His hands wavered upward. He knew now what had happened. This man was the relief guard. He must have seen them leave the ship and had skirted around behind them.

"How'd you birds break out, anyway?" the pirate demanded wonderingly. "Okay, march. Into the cabin. We'll see what the chief has to say about this."

Jimmy would rather have marched into war than to enter the cabin. Good God, any minute the *keoloo* would go! He couldn't break for it now. That would mean certain death. He forced his terrified brain to think. They couldn't all be in the cabin when the tree fell. Otherwise, what would happen to Dorothy and her mother and their maid?

As they entered the cabin, Jimmy deliberately fell to the rear, letting J. S. Bryant lead the way. The guard's gun prodded against Jimmy's back as Wild Bill Hall looked up from the table around which he and the rest of the crew was gathered. He blinked at J. S. Bryant.

The pirate who held the gun on them explained briefly. Hall rose dangerously. "You boys are resourceful," he admitted. "I guess I'll have to chain you in the ship."

AT THAT moment, Jimmy heard something. A brittle, splitting sound. Alone of all the men in the cabin, he knew what that sound meant. The *keoloo* tree has a fairly tough rind of bark around its ponderous, pulpy interior. It was that tough casing alone which was holding the dangerously leaning *keoloo* erect. The spliting sound meant that the *keoloo* had already started to fall.

An eternity seemed to pass after that sound. Jimmy's life paraded before his mind as it does for a man near death. He thought of Dorothy, of Bryant, of the thousands of settlers who might have to wait another quarter of a century for the industrialization of the Saturnian and Jovian Worlds if Bryant died. And Bryant *would* die unless—

Jimmy did not think of himself. He couldn't. This was the time when the individual became *nil*, and the thousand to one chance had to be taken.

There is a certain judo trick wherein

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one can sometimes best a man who has a gun sticking in your back. Jimmy pulled it. He turned his body at right angles, so quickly that the gun was pointing at empty air. The gun fired, and the invisible burst of killing light struck a pirate in the throat. Jimmy's right arm swung down, knocking the flare-stick from the man's hand, and bringing Jimmy facing him. Jimmy pushed his face in and tripped him and yelled,

"Make a break for it! *Get out of the cabin!*"

He whirled again, kicked the kitchen table up into the pirates' face just as Hall was about to fire. Everything was wildest confusion. Jimmy shoved one of Bryant's more stupid friends toward the door. The four men tumbled out ahead of Jimmy. All of this could not have taken more than fifteen seconds from the time the *keoloo* tree's bark had split. Jimmy turned around just as Wild Bill Hall framed his massive body in the doorway.

Jimmy looked at him savagely. His booted foot drove square into Wild Bill Hall's stomach. He staggered back into the cabin and Jimmy yelled, "That's for the rubber check!" Jimmy hurled himself from the cabin.

And the *keoloo* fell. Jimmy heard the swishing sound as it cut the air, as it fell, slowly under this lower gravity, but fast enough. The tree fell athwart the cabin. It crushed through the two-by-four joists. The cabin crunched, and snapping boards slung-shot themselves high into the air. The powdered debris of masonry rose in hissing clouds. Walls tumbled inward, and the cabin lay in awful havoc.

No sign of life came from that tumbled heap, no outcry, no movement. And now that the worst was over, Jimmy Tracer's knees wobbled, and he sat down, his body one mass of shaking nerves. Later, the men went toward the ship, found the keys to the cabin on the person of the one pirate who remained alive, and freed the three women.

Dorothy threw herself sobbing into Jimmy's arms.

"We didn't know *what* had happened to you," she chattered, her face tear-streaked. Jimmy rumpled his hand adoringly through her auburn hair.

"It's all right now. Everything's all right, honey. The police will be along sooner or later, but in the meantime we'll just camp here. And I don't care any more—a c t u a l l y—whether your father builds his space-ship factory near Jupiter or near Saturn. It doesn't matter. The main thing is that this neck of the woods is going to be industrialized!"

J. S. BRYANT made a *harrumph*-ing sound. He grasped Jimmy's shoulder looking him square in the eyes.

"I care, Jimmy," he said quietly. "We've already decided on the site for the factory. The others agree with me. We're going to build it in the Jovian System. Matter of fact, ah, seeing as how you seemed to have kept abreast of market trends and already have a *keoloo* plantation laid out—we're going to build it on Ganymede!"

"That is," put in Fahenstock quickly, hopefully, "if you'll sell us *keoloo*-rubber.

"Well—" said Jimmy.

"We don't know if we will or not," Dorothy Bryant said, looking at her father with hostile eyes. "Some of the things you've said about Jimmy weren't so nice, dad, and I think—"

"All right, damnit!" roared Bryant. "My own daughter always has gone against me. Jimmy, I apologize. I mean that sincerely. I guess *I* was the sucker, not realizing that you really

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By Kris Neville

What was this strange secret that made a tiny world stand valiantly against one of the most powerful foes in all the Universe?

THE ROOM was close, smoke-filled, stale. The flickering light from the projector lanced to the small screen.

The men had seen the film many times, and still they watched.

On the screen the Senator pushed back his cards. "Too steep for me," he said. Across the table, Edwin Nelson flicked openers and raked in the pot. Jerry Ward called in the cards, ruffled them expertly. "It's about my turn to win one, gentlemen," he said.

The Senator chewed on his unlit cigar; he pulled in his cards, stacked them, and peered under the corner of the top one. "Maybe," he grunted.

Edwin Nelson tossed his cards away. "Even God couldn't make anything out of that one," he said.

The Senator opened play with a red chip. The three other men stayed.

The Senator placed his cards on the table, face down. "I'll play these."

The other men called for their cards. He dealt himself one card.

"A single blue," the Senator said. "Just enough to keep you people in." Two men dropped. Jerry Ward peeked under the corner of his last card. He rubbed a blue chip between his thumb and forefinger. "Call," he said.

The Senator turned his hand over, one card at a time. "Aces, full."

"Your pot."

The Senator pulled in the chips. He picked up a blue one, turned it over in his hand, flipped it into the air.

One of the men in the audience called sharply, "Hold it right there!"

And the figures on the screen froze into immobility.

"Well?" the man demanded.

After a moment he got the answer. "Jerry Ward stacked the cards."

"Good. I think this breaks it." The man turned to one of his aides. "Count them."

The aide approached the screen. He counted the blue chips before the Senator, including the one that was suspended in the air. "Sixteen," he said.

"Run it," the Chief ordered.

The blue chip fell back into the Senator's waiting hand. Jerry Ward,

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on the screen, muttered and looked at his neatly stacked chips. "An even five hundred," he remarked almost indifferently.

Edwin Nelson paid from the bank, rustling the green sheaves crisply.

Jerry Ward stood up. "Thank you, gentlemen."

"We'll see you next week?" Edwin Nelson asked.

"Hell yes; this party is becoming traditional."

He turned from the table and walked out of the room; for a moment his bulk shut off the camera eye.

Once again the table was in full view. "Hold it!" the Chief ordered again, and again the figures halted in mid-motion.

"Count them now!"

THERE WAS a pause as the aide approached the screen. "Better run it back a couple of frames, Fred," he told the projectionist. Fred complied He counted the chips carefully. "Only fifteen now," he said.

"He did pocket one: good. Start it again."

Action resumed on the screen, the hum-drum action of a friendly poker game. But the missing blue chip did not come back into play. And, at the end of the game, Edwin Nelson got back all the chips he started with.

The film went off and the lights came on.

"Whew!" the Chief said. "That's that. But for rotten luck, Ward blocking the camera at the crucial moment, we'd have had it long before this.... Still, but for good luck, we'd never have looked at the film this close."

"How's that, Chief?" asked Fred. He was new on the case.

"Well, we knew that Jerry Ward encoded a message in his apartment, just before leaving for the poker game. He didn't stop off on his way. Our agent picked him up when he left Nelson's—and that's where the good luck came in, altho it didn't seem like it at the time. We'd been watching *him for months, waiting for him to* act, to contact the top man. We were thorough. Tapped wires, even this camera to record his customary Saturday night poker party. We didn't overlook anything. And then when Ward spotted our agent tailing him, it looked like all our work was for nothing.

"Because Ward killed himself. Didn't even bother to park his car. He'd been carrying poison with him for some time. When he saw our man he took it, without even hesitating. Piled the car, and by the time our man got to him, he was plenty dead."

The Chief mused, almost to himself, "It takes a man with a lot of guts to kill himself just to keep from answering a few questions."

He paused, and then continued. "We searched him, and he didn't have the message. But for that we might have followed him for weeks, waiting for him to pass it. Ironic, isn't it? By *killing himself, he told us what we* would never have found out—at least in time—while he was alive. Because his death meant two things. It meant that the message was plenty important. And it meant that one of the men at the party had received it. That narrowed the field. But all the men were top government men, and we couldn't grill them all. We had to find out which one had it. We had to take it slow. Check every foot of the film."

He smiled again, with a large measure of self-satisfaction.

"All we need now is to tie up a few loose ends. That will take a little time. I'll check into the Senator's past.

"And meanwhile, we'll keep an agent on him. He won't suspect anything.

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At the first sign of something suspicious we'll haul him in and have him red handed."

The Chief looked around.

"Those boys are smart. We're smarter. When we pick up the Senator from the great and noble state of California, we'll move in and break up the whole net-work.

"But this is big. Plenty big. We have to be doubly careful. The men are desperate and—well—publicity would mean—literally—suicide."

No one said anything. "I can't quite understand how a Senator could be mixed up in this, but I intend to find out."

The Chief started to leave, and then turned back for a final word. "I told you we knew what that message said. We do. And it's so important to the security of the country that I can't even tell you men what it was."

With that he walked out of the room.

THE SENATOR'S face was heavy; his beard shone bluely, under freshly shaved skin. His jowls had begun to sag from rich living. His lips were heavy, sensuous. And his eyes were alive with ambition.

He was sitting at his desk; he had just finished decoding the message. The code was kept in his locked safe, and there was never any great hurry about it. He laid the paper to one side; his hand was shaking. He tried to control himself.

It was unbelievable, and yet....

Blind exultation began to rise in him.

He stood up and began to pace the office. Finally he walked to the window and stared out over the city, his hands, behind his back, clasping and unclasping. His eyes caught fire from some deep emotion.

He stood unmoving for a long moment. The desk buzzer finally shocked him from his reverie. He flinched. He crossed rapidly to the desk and flicked the switch.

"Yeah?" he asked. And could feel his stomach tightening. Perspiration blossomed on his forehead.

"A Mr. Lodge to see you, Senator. He's from the seventh district."

"Send him—" the Senator began and then bit his lip. Long years of unquestioned security had made him careless. Those years were passed, now. He could no longer afford any risk. Because the Day was practically upon him. "No....Have him wait, please."

The Senator glanced nervously at the panneled door. After a moment of indecision, he picked up the paper from his desk, held it over the flame from his cigarette lighter. When the fire touched his thumb, he dropped the charred remains into the ash tray. Smoke curled for a moment and then there was nothing but dead ash. This he ground into an inky pulp with his sweaty thumb. He carried it to the window and emptied it down into the teeming street below. He wiped his hands carefully, looked after the ashes, and then returned to his desk.

Action was part of his philosophy. Another part was never to underestimate the enemy. He forced himself to assume, now, that they knew all about him. Whether or not they did was quite beside the point. He could afford no risk. The courier ship was due shortly. He would have to meet it. He could not trust a messenger. And, even if he could, it would be wise to get out of the country—now. This was so important that he could sacrifice the twenty-seven years of labor that he had exerted to elevate him to a position of authority. If he could get this message out of the country, he would return to command a position

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far more influential than one of one hundred senators. His position might lack tradition, but it would not matter.

He had to play it calm. If they knew, they would pick him up at the slightest sign of flight. They would have to! He would have to assume that he was being watched every minute. And act accordingly.

"I'll see—Mr.—ah—Lodge, the gentleman from the seventh district, now," he told his secretary.

Relax, he told himself. Relax. Act natural.

THE SENATOR began to act in a new phase of the play. He had been well prepared for the part.

His political philosophy was not so much the product of thought as it was of passion. It provided an idealistic goal so completely divorced from the possibilities of human existence that it became believable according to the same principle that the bigger the lie, the more people who can be made to believe it.

Indeed the Senator frequently considered, with no little satisfaction, how supremely lucky he was to be in intimate contact with the Ultimate Truth of reality. And, as he saw it, it was this contact, this almost religious faith, that the American form of democracy lacked. This righteous identification. For surely American democracy was far too shallow, insipid, and uninspiring to incite great passions. His faith shone untarnished throughout the long years.

He was not alone. There were others, too. There were different levels of it.

There were the pathetic little people—the malcontents, the neurotics, men and women beaten by life, hounded by fears, by doubts, by impossible dreams, men and women seeing in the sprawling giant of organized society veiled demons, men and women turning outward in search of certainty to fill the vacuum left by spiritual, moral and philosophic failure—there were these little people, the unadjustable, who carpentered up a house of faith around themselves from the moondust of abstract ideas; these pathetic people were the ones who stormed the cannon's mouth, who beat against the ramparts in bloody, futile rage, in their breasts burning the light of the universal panacea.

But the ones, like the Senator, were more insidious, more subtile. They did not storm ramparts. No. They were men who felt no inner vacuum. They were men of indominable will, hardened by the fires of training, by an undying ambition to victory, and by complete confidence in self.

Like bitter seeds these men were sown in the land. Some of them sank evil plant—the organization of the pathetic people. But some rose, by virtue of natural ability, training, and ruthless purpose, to positions of authority in a government that must forever remain alien to them. Of these, some reestablished contact with the spy net-work, the sour roots of an evil plant—the organization of the pathetic people. And others played the lone hand, divorcing every external bond but loyalty that connected them with the Enemy: Men whose very names had been forgotten by the government for whom they worked.

But all of them, each after his own fashion, each as it was given him to see the light, striving continually for the Day.

In original conception, it was to have been a Glorious Day of military conquest. Of sudden armed attack, aided by disorganization from within. But with the arrival of the satellites, that plan was forgotten. Because the

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Enemy homeland was always in direct line target from at least one of them, and attack would be merely an invitation to death.

Only the method changed; the goal remained an ever fixed mark. No longer did the Party look for outside deliverance. It came to look introspectively inward. For there must be found the method. And the method was revolt. Well planned, sudden revolt.

The pathetic people proselytized unceasingly, actively, directly, to that end

THE OTHER people, the changlings, worked by indirection. Take the example of the Senator. His route was devious. But effective. He worked always to accentuate the ills of the system; he incited revolt by pushing democratic processes to their absolute in corruption. His aim was to oppress. And nothing pleased him more than universal discontent, or a debilitating plague, flood, fire or famine. He was intent to *force* the people to rebel. His technique was perfect; all his measures were executed under a chauvinistic exterior: ostensible unity that only created vicious disunity.

One columnist, with heightened perspicuity, once wrote:

"One cannot question his intentions, or his loyalty; and yet, were he a dozen foreign agents, bent on sabotage, he could scarcely accomplish more for the Enemy."

And now the Senator had, locked up within his mind, the secret that would make armed attack again possible. Strange fruit was hanging ripe on the boughs of an atom blast. If he could get it out of the country.

The Chief checked into the Senator's background. And slowly but surely, the fantastic became clear to him.

The man had been born in Arkansas. Little formal schooling. Showed little ability, in fact. Shiftless. Left his home town at twenty. Went west.

There was a six month blackout for the record.

Then he showed up in Los Angeles.

The conclusion became inescapable. The man who had begun such a brilliant political career in Los Angeles was not the same man who had left Sweetwater Springs. Somewhere, somehow, in those dark six months a changling had been substituted.

The Chief's mind reeled under the implications. As long as twenty-seven years ago—as early as 1932—the Enemy was preparing a subtile, well organized Fifth Column. Even before Adolph Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany!

And for 27 years a man had posed as an American, and won high elective offices, while he was master-minding a network of spies. Complacent, unknown, unsuspected.

While the Party was sabotaging, inciting, proposing, opposing, protesting, and making a superficial show full of sound and fury, he was working along quietly, undercover, in the very innards of the government.

The Chief, for the first time, was a frightened man.

"Better pick him up," he said.

Which they would have done. But for the fact that they couldn't find him.

When the Chief viewed the latest film from the Senator's office, he had reason to be puzzled.

The Senator had, quite matter-of-factly, placed a coil of rope, a bulky automatic, and a pistol in his brief case. Those articles had come from his safe, and one would scarcely expect to find things like that in a Senator's safe. He had zipped the brief case shut, and, as if this were the

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commonest thing in the world, carried it out of his office like a man taking home a sheaf of paper work for the week end.

The agent who rode down the elevator with him reported that he showed no signs of nervousness. He spoke pleasantly to the operator, an old man named Jimmy who held his job largely due to the Senator's influence.

HE WALKED out of the Senate Office Building and signalled the first cab. The cab driver was one of the Chief's agents. And he never reported. The last the Chief knew of the spy was when the cab was swallowed up in the south bound traffic....

"Drive me around town," the Senator instructed the cabby.

"Yes, sir. Any place in particular?"

"Just drive."

"Yes, sir."

Winter was coming and the cherry trees were dying.

"Drive slower, please."

The Washington Monument was a dull finger against the slate sky. No car was following; the Senator took his time, made sure.

"Now drive to the Naval Airport," he told the cabby.

Then, after several miles, "Turn off here."

The driver looked around, startled. He was looking into the face of the Senator's automatic. He turned off onto the side road.

"Park," the Senator ordered harshly.

The cabby stopped the car.

And the Senator swung the gun in a vicious arc. The agent tried to duck, failed, as a ripe thud testified, and slumped limply over the wheel.

The Senator worked fast. He stripped off the man's coat, slipped into it, and dragged the man from the car. He pulled him some distance from the road and knelt over his limp form. He placed the gun just below the man's ribs, slanted up the muzzle. It didn't make so much noise, that way, when he pulled the trigger.

The Senator drove slowly back to Washingnton. He left the coat in the cab when he parked it on a side street. He took another cab to the railroad station. He bought a ticket to Easton, boarded the train, and left it at South Street Station, Philadelphia.

And while the Senator was on the train, the Chief swung the vast organization that he headed into action.

He sent out a general alarm. There was no name given. Just description.

Until now the Chief had never considered, even for a moment, that the Senator could have escaped his organization. And it was a frightening consideration.

Most of the day Saturday he paced his office, smacking the fist of his right hand into the palm of his left, all the while cursing in a low monotone.

It was late in the afternoon when the news broke. It had been, again, a matter of luck. Just outside of New London a motorcycle officer had stopped a car for speeding. The officer had recognized the Senator; he made the mistake of reaching for his gun, and the Senator shot him. A passing motorist had taken him to the Emergency Hospital where, with his last breath, he coughed out the license number and description of the car.

At least they had something to work with.

As night fell, road blocks sprung up.

The Chief ordered out the Coast Guard boats; he alerted the Air Force.

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His agents picked up the trail again, north of Boston. At eleven o'clock they located his abandoned car. And it began to rain.

It was then, and only then, that the Chief thought about notifying the Director of Satellites. Fortunately, the Chief knew how to break red tape. Within five minutes he had the Director on an extension in a famous night club.

"Hello.... This is Arnold.... Right." The Chief took a deep breath. "Listen: All hell's broke loose.... How soon can you re-arm the satellites?"

The Director, at the other end of the line, gasped. Top secret information had just sputtered over a public phone.

"I.... Just a moment."

The Chief could hear the Director say something to somebody. The Chief gripped the phone in a grip of steel; his hands were sweaty. His heart was pounding like war drums.

"Hello, Arnold.... It would take three days to get the first—war-head installed."

"You haven't got that much time," the Chief almost spat at him.

"It would take twenty-four hours to get a rocket loaded and ready. Longer than that, jockeying for position. A good six—maybe ten—hours to arm a satellite, once we got the war-head there. This is a technical operation: it takes time."

The Chief said nothing for a long moment. "I'm afraid..." He began, and then let the phone drop into its cradle. "Too late," he said to no one.

THE CHIEF walked over and sat down. He began to laugh. If the Senator got out of the country, approximately twenty-four hours would remain before the Enemy attacked. And how would he spend those hours? In prayer and fasting? Drunk, trying to forget? No.

He would spend them explaining, in a closed door hearing, before the President and the Cabinet, exactly how it had happened.

What could he say? Only: I was careless. A hollow, empty thing.

"And sir, with the life of the nation at stake, how could you afford to be careless?"

There could be no answer. Failure has no excuse. "I under-estimated the Enemy." God! How awful it sounded. "You fool, you fool," he told himself.

And they would ask him how this man Ward got the information in the first place. As if it made any difference.

But he would have to explain it.

He could imagine the scene, the grim lipped inquisitioners.

He could see himself talking.

"Secrets cannot be kept. Not big ones. Too many things tip them off. There doesn't even need to be a leak, a security leak, in the conventional sense.

"During the last war, enemy agents deduced ship movements from seemingly unrelated scraps of information. Germany knew we were working on an Atom bomb: demand for certain raw materials, on a scale so colossal as to defy secrecy, told them that. We could deduce in exactly the same fashion, that Russia would have her first Atom bomb by June, 1949. We knew that as early as the winter of '46. You can't keep big secrets.

"And about the satellites, any fairly well organized spy net work, headed by a man of some intelligence and imagination—as Jerry Ward was—could have discovered what we were hiding.

"Perhaps he had a scattering of facts, facts that are bound to leak out. They might have been these:

"The government is conducting ex-

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tensive psychological tests. Big project, and no information is being released.

"One satellite pilot killed his parents in Troy (This is the kind of information they can pick up from a Party member who lived next door). Another murdered his wife and child in Saint Louis. Both were definitely pathological cases. The spy might well stop here and ask if there is any connection between the government research and the insane satellite pilots. The answer seems obvious.

"A space torpedo, apparently shot from a satellite, hit in the Rocky Mountains. It did not explode (Maybe a native of Denver reported this choice rumor). Why?

"And in each case the government clamped down strict secrecy..... The facts of secrecy, themselves, give rise to something of consequence: they relate seemingly unrelated factors within a common framework.

"Spies observing the rocket ports reported an increase of activity, just prior to the torpedo in the Rocky Mountains. For almost a month there was an unusual amount of traffic with the satellites; and then it fell off to normal again. The government did not mention this: indeed, tried to keep it a secret.

"From these few facts, even a fool can see everything isn't normal.

"From a hundred more facts, like these, a theory develops:

"That the satellite pilots, under the terrific emotional strain, are becoming unreliable.

"Psychologists, and psychiatrists haven't found a solution.

"Yet something must be done, before a crazed pilot scatters the whole planet with destruction.

"A space torpedo hit in America. It didn't go off. Therefore something *was* done. But not to the pilots. No. To the torpedos, instead. The war-heads had been removed. And that explains the increased traffic of the preceeding month.

"With the satellites disarmed, the spy knows that we have no defense. For our defense was a threat; valuable only so long as we could execute it. Now all we have is empty, whirling, defanged machines."

The Chief stopped imagining it.

"Damn it! Any new reports?"

"No sir....wait! Something is coming in now."

The Chief ripped the head set off the operator's head and clamped it, savagely over his own ears....

THE RAIN was cold; it came down in a steady drizzle, and the night was pitch dark.

For a moment he was afraid that he had the wrong location. He wanted a cigarette. But he was afraid to light it.

And he knew that they were closing in on him. His car radio told him that much.

He needed time; not much. His luminous dial showed he was fifteen minutes early.

He pressed closely against a wet tree trunk and listened intently for sounds of pursuit. Time dragged.

Finally, he uncoiled the rope, tied it firmly to the tree trunk, and threw the free end over the cliff. Still, the woods were silent.

Five minutes.

And he heard voices. Voices coming muffled through the rain.

A light winked from among the trees, briefly.

He tried holding his breath.

And then it came—the flash from the sea. Through the mists it was vague and blurred. But it was the signal. He took a deep breath. He felt his muscles tense. He had to answer it.

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The Very pistol sent its ripple of fire upward. The star shell burst, scattering flame throughout the raindrops. And the flare died.

That brought commotion from behind him; excited voices muttered.

He threw the Very pistol from him.

"Here!" a voice roared. It came from very near.

The Senator fired. The sound was loud and the gun jumped savagely in his hand.

A flash and a roar answered him. He could hear the bullet snap past his head.

A flashlight searched for him.

He took careful aim on the light and fired. He ducked behind the tree.

From somewhere he could hear the crackle of a walky-talky.

He ran, in the darkness, to the cliff edge; he threw the gun into the forest. Someone fired in that direction.

He was swinging down the rope, hand over hand. His breath came roaring in his ears. He was fat, and his wind was short. It felt as if his arms were going to be torn out of their sockets.

He began to swing, and his body slammed into the cliff with cruel force.

His hands were ripped raw and they began to bleed.

The rope jerked. Someone, at the top, had tripped over it.

He could hear their voices again.

A flashlight winked from the top. It caught him in the center of the beam. The rope was slippery with blood and rain.

A BULLET snarled by him. And then he felt himself knocked off the rope, as if a powerful hand had slammed into his shoulder.

He was falling, falling. He hit the water; it closed over him. He sank.

After a moment he struggled to the top. The water was freezing. His right arm hung leaden.

From the top, a searchlight opened up. It was a portable one, but it was powerful. Waves were trying to sweep him into the cliff. Light played over the water. It found him.

A rifle crackled and a gusher of water spouted by his ear.

Then from the dark sea beyond, a machinegun chattered viciously. It took a long time for the gun to get the light. But it did. The brilliance died slowly away, and the machinegun continued to spray the top of the cliff.

It seemed like hours to the Senator before he felt the men pulling him aboard the small boat.

An outboard motor sputtered to life and the small craft raced away. Down the coast a Coast Guard boat was sending a spray of light into the deepening fog.

The small boat drew alongside of the submarine. He felt himself being lifted up the slippery side. His right arm was full of lancing fire.

Overhead, the first fighting plane from Westover Field dropped a flare. Burning a sickly green, it drifted into the sea.

By its light the fighter dived at the shadowy ship.

The submarine slipped under the surface.

A depth charge shook it, and it began to sink, down, down, slowly down. It headed for the cliffs, where it lay for three hours, alongside the bottom, while the depth bombs exploded in semi-circles, outward. When morning came, it jockeyed around, and headed out to sea. There was a thick fog and little danger that the air crafts would locate it.

It surfaced and streaked toward the mother ship.

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The LAUGHING DEATH

By Alexander Blade

Space travel at best is not funny. And yet these men were laughing themselves to death! . . .

HE SAID: "...Therefore, because it is the most dangerous mission any of you are ever likely to be on, I want to impress on your minds this thought. There must be no discussion of this, not even among yourselves, for safety's sake."

He caught the look in his son's eyes. There was pride and eagerness in them, the desire to serve... And sud-

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denly anger burned in his breast. Idiots all! Damn them. Damn his son most of all. They were all mad. Well, he'd soon put an end to it.

A crafty smile came to his mouth, in his eyes. Brittle laughter bubbled out of him, died on a high note. He saw the startled, frightened looks on their faces....

And James Miden jerked the pistol free, took swift aim and shot his father between the eyes....

Colonel Haynes stopped his pacing before the uniformed flier standing with his back to the wide window. "I can't tell you how sorry I am, son. Your father and I were old friends. We went through many things together."

"I know, sir," Captain James Miden said. There wasn't much else to say.

The Colonel sighed. "He would rather have gone out facing the enemy."

"We all want to go that way," the other said. He hoped it would end soon and then maybe he could go somewhere and be alone.

"But to die with the 'laughing madness' in his brain...."

"I—think he died before it had more than begun."

Colonel Haynes threw the boy a sharp look. Good Heavens! A hell of a thing to do, keep reminding young Miden about it. He doesn't look good, either. Better give him liberty, enough until he can get over it.

"Captain. This is an order. Forty eight hours off base, in civvies. Get drunk; go out and have fun. One thing. You di dhim a favor. Keep that in mind!"

"Yes, sir. And thank you, sir." Miden saluted and walked past the Colonel.

The door closed softly behind him. Colonel Haynes stared emptily into the dim-lit avenue below. What was it the people called it? 'The Laughing Death'. That was it. He wondered who among them was to feel its bite next....

THERE WAS a party going on in the next booth. He could hear the sounds of women's voices and the heavier voices of men. Now and then there was a tinkling, as of a bottle rapping the edge of a glass. But the curtain between them muted the sounds and after a while he forgot them.

The whiskey was losing its bite. And he was still sober. Sober as the waiter's face. Sober as the 'Gloomy Gus' patrol which had just entered the room. He watched the four men as they made the rounds of the patrons and admired the way they worked.

One of the patrol asked for identity tickets. The other three stood with their backs to one another, their fingers pressed lightly on the triggers of their guns. They covered the whole room. As soon as the free man was done with his questioning they moved to another party, another booth.

Then the leader of the patrol was bending over his table.

"Your identity ticket, please..."

Miden opened his wallet and showed his privilege pass.

"Thank you, sir. A laughing man escaped custody a short while ago. Headed this way."

"I see," Miden said. "I hope you get him."

"We will, sir. You know how it is, though. He might be okay for a couple of hours or he might go off his top in a matter of seconds. Got to get to him before he hurts someone." The patrol leader touched the peak of his cap and motioned for his men to follow him to the next booth.

"Another drink, sir?"

Miden looked up in sudden sur-

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prise. He hadn't heard the waiter approach. "Yes. Might as well."

The waiter lifted the ash tray, dumped the contents to the floor, wiped the ash tray and put it back on the cloth. His lip curled. "Huh! Noseys! Gloomy Guses... They didn't bother you, did they, sir?"

"It wasn't a bother. They've got a job to do," Miden said.

"Yeah. So've we all. Blasted war! Think it might end soon, sir? Nast buggers, those Martians."

Miden looked at the gaunt, seamed face above him and wondered what he had to worry about. Too old for active service, no vocation, no aptitude for war work. Waiting was all he could do...

"...My drink, waiter..."

"Yes, sir! Right up."

The four-man patrol crossed his line of vision, passed out the door. The hush which had fallen on their entrance was broken with their exit. The dull monotone of talk swept the room. Miden listened and wondered. No animation in any of the faces or voices. Behind the voices lay the same unspoken fear. The laughing death. No one dared laugh, or even smile. The whole world had lost its humor. For even to smile could mean instant death.

Miden sighed and thought he was a fool. Might as well have stayed on base. Abruptly, he became aware of a woman's voice:

"...Be nice. Please!"

"...Aah. Come on. Give a man a kiss, baby." A thick voice replied.

"No! And if you don't stop I'll leave."

"...The hell you will!" the man said.

There was the sudden sound of a struggle, the frantic sound of a woman's voice, using futile words, and the panting sound of a man intent on lust.

MIDEN SPREAD the curtain, narrowed his eyes and peered into the booth. The single neorescent bulb had been turned low. A man and woman sat side by side in the far end of the booth. The man was sprawled across the table, the woman sat with her head back against the head rest, her eyes closed. A thick-shouldered man was trying to wrestle a girl over the table to his side. It was the girl who was making the frightened sounds, the man, the panting animal ones.

As Miden reached out to grab the man he noticed a slit in the curtain facing his booth; he could see the gleam of light beyond. Then his fingers were gripping the cloth and he was heaving backward on braced legs.

Miden caught a glimpse of a fleshy face, eyes half-hidden beneath leaden lids, and last, the bottle clutched in the man's hand. He ducked in time, and brought up a knee to feel it drive home where he wanted it to. The man grunted sourly, slumped, and Miden hit him with a chopping right. The man skidded across the floor and landed against a table, knocking it down.

Miden didn't wait. He reached in again, grabbed the girl's wrist and yanked her out. They reached the door before the other managed to disentangle himself...

She sat with eyes closed, her head pressed against the upholstery of the cab. Miden watched her. "Feel better now?" he asked.

She opened her eyes. He couldn't see them but judged they were blue. She had blonde hair; they should be blue.

"Yes. Yes, I feel better. I didn't think he would get nasty."

"Obviously."

Her eyes went wide then closed until he couldn't see them at all. "You think I'm lying?"

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He shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't matter," he said. "Is there someplace I can drop you off?"

"Anywhere. Anywhere at all. It doesn't matter."

"Well, if it doesn't matter to either of us, I was going to get something to eat. Join me?"

She seemed to be studying the line of hair at the back of the cab driver's neck. "No!" She turned slowly and looked him full in the eyes. Then: "...You were alone. I am too, now. Come up to my place."

The Colonel's orders, Miden thought. Have fun... He asked her the number. It proved to be a hotel on the near North Side....

"HOW COME you're not in the army?" she asked.

"No cream," he waved the small pitcher away. "I like my coffee black. Army? I am. Air corp."

Her mouth formed an O. He thought how pleasant her lips would be to kiss. They were so full, so red. She poured cream into her cup then took the pitcher away. She returned a moment later bearing a small tray on which were some cold cuts and several slices of bread.

"Food! I didn't realize how hungry I was," she said.

He took a sandwich, munched on it and watched her. She had changed into a housecoat shortly after they arrived. He had made himself comfortable on the sofa while she busied herself in the tiny kitchen adjoining the other room of the apartment. He gathered the sofa was also the bed.

She swallowed the last of her sandwich, found a few crumbs on the plate and licked them from her fingers. "That was good," she said. "Air corp, huh? You gave me the idea you were a flyer. They take them young, alert. Like yourself."

"How do you know how they like them?" he asked.

Her eyes fell. He got the impression she was studying him from behind the lids. "You've been dying to ask me, haven't you? But you don't know how. Well, I'll tell you. I am what you think I am. Satisfied?"

He felt heat flood his face. He *had* thought he was playing the wise one. Dumb of him. "Don't get mad!" he said. "It's the way things are."

"A fat lot you know how things are," she said. Her voice was flat. "About twenty five; been in maybe eight years now. Maybe nine. Maybe you've been on a hundred missions..."

"A hundred and fifty. And I'm twenty six. So what?"

"So nothing. You couldn't understand! Why don't you finish your coffee and get the hell out of here."

"I can do that without finishing."

"Then do it!"

"Okay!" He slammed the cup down, the brown liquid sloshing the table, and got to his feet. She watched him, wide-eyed. He got to the door and felt, rather than heard her. Her fingers were on his arm. He turned and her arms went around his neck, her lips were sucking at his, her body was pressing tight to his own...

There were steps inside his belly. Something kept trotting lightly up and down those steps. His collar felt tight, there was a thickness in his throat. He kept looking at her but she was moving away from him. She looked at him over her shoulder.

"Well...?"

"Why did you do that?" he asked.

"I didn't want you to leave without learning a little..." she paused. "... About a woman like myself."

"Okay!" he growled thickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

She fell on the sofa, patted the seat beside her. "Come here."

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He walked slowly forward and sat beside her. She reached up and began to unfasten his tie. He helped her. His fingers seemed oddly stiff and he couldn't get the knot undone. She leaned back and her lips formed another O. He tore the tie loose...

SHE HAD left a note for him. It had been brief and to the point. It said she had something to do but would meet him at the corner lunch room at noon. He sat at the counter facing the windows and played with the cup of coffee before him. The clock on the wall said one fifteen...

Damn her, he thought. Then, forget her. He looked to the clock again. Sixteen after... Probably looking for business, he thought. Well, he still had twenty four hours. With that much time left on a pass you couldn't spend it in a corner lunchroom waiting for some one like Nyra Bayes. That was her name. And suddenly he felt her, smelled her, tasted her again.

He slid from the stool, paid the check and walked out into the street. He wasn't conscious that he had turned in the direction of her hotel. But when he paused before the shabby awning he knew why he had come. He had to see her again.

He walked past the desk and took the stairs up. She lived on the second floor. He made the turn in the corridor just as a man stepped from a room at the far end. He could not see the room but memory told him it was hers. He walked slowly, looking straight ahead.

There was something familiar about the man coming toward him. The drooping left shoulder, the gaunt seamed face, struck a note in Miden's mind. It came to him as he put his hand on the knob. The waiter!

The knob did not turn and he called again!

"...It's me, Jimmy Miden."

This time the knob turned. She held the door open and watched him cross the room and drop to the sofa. The room looked a little more down-at-the-heel in the afternoon light. She closed the door and faced him, her back to it.

"I waited," he said. "You didn't show."

"I was just leaving," she said. They both knew she was lying.

"Who was the man who just left your room?"

"Man...? Oh! He delivered a bottle of whiskey. I ordered."

It was on the table before him still in its wrappings. There was a newspaper beside it. The headlines were four-inch streamers; panic had struck New York City.

Milen's "Uh-hunh" committed him to nothing.

She moved briskly to the kitchen, returned in a few seconds with two glasses and took up the bottle and tore off the wrappings. The cork came out with a slight popping sound. She poured a drink for the two of them and stood before him, holding hers.

He decided blue was her best color. The suit she was wearing was a deep blue, snug in the right places, showing her best points to advantage. She was wearing lighter blue shoes and a matching handbag lay on the table. Her hair was piled in a heavy braid. Her eyes in the light of the day were ice-blue.

"Do I look the same?" she asked. Her eyes probed his over the rim of the glass.

He sighed. "Yes. Even more beautiful."

"Then I'm forgiven...?"

"You knew I'd come," he grunted. "I was here, wasn't I?"

"But not because you were expecting me."

Anger always lay close to the sur-

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face with her. "Let's get something straight!" she snapped. "You did me a favor last night. Don't try to run my life because of it. You walked in, you can walk out."

"You know I can't do that," he said. His face had drained of color. Even his lips were a pale line across the lower jaw.

Her head moved slightly in a satisfied nod. She said, "Don't tell me that. You're a flier and on a forty-eight hour pass. You've got to go back to your base or they'll come and get you. That's what you said last night. There's nothing I can do about that."

"I can get an extension. A week..."

"A week, a month, it makes no difference. You always have to go back. Then one day you're transferred to active duty and I don't see you again. Sorry!" She made it sound final.

He drained the glass of whiskey, rose and stepped to her. He took the glass from her fingers put it on the table then put his arms around her yielding body and kissed her. Her mouth was a flame and her body an altar.

After a while he said: "I haven't stopped thinking about you for a single second. You know that." It was a statement. "I can get leave every night."

Her sigh against his cheek was as light as a cobweb's touch. "I just didn't want to get involved again," she said.

HIS SIGH echoed hers. There were sudden lines in his young face as he pulled it back. They hadn't been there before. She was sure of it. They were the lines pain etches into the skin.

"Nyra... Do you always order your whiskey from a tavern a mile from your hotel when there's a package store on the corner?"

This time she jerked away from him. He stood facing her, his hands at his side, his dark eyes brooding.

"You think I'm lying...?"

He was patient: "The man who delivered the whiskey was our waiter at the tavern. There was a man sitting opposite at the lunchroom. He was reading a paper. I couldn't see his face. But I saw a peculiar scar on his hand holding the paper. I didn't see the face of the man drunk across the table. But I saw his hand shielding it. The same scar. There was a slit in the curtain of your booth: The big guy you were with knew who was in that booth. Well, Nyra...?"

Her face was the color of cold wax. The blue clothes and accessories no longer looked pretty. She took a couple of backward steps. "All right. Think anything you want. I don't know what you're talking about."

His lips were dry and the words came a little thickly: "I killed my father early last night. He was briefing a group of us on a mission we will go on. He was proud of me, proud that his son had been selected to go on this mission. I saw it in his eyes a second before the Laughing Death struck him. He was reaching for the gun in his drawer. *I* saw the sudden look of hate and I knew I had to kill him before... Nyra! I love you. Understand? And I'd kill you just as quickly."

He thought she was going to faint. Her eyes closed and she swayed for an instant. But before he could reach for her she had recovered.

"Let's—let's sit for a minute, Jimmy," she said.

He stood, afraid that if he sat at her side what was in him would resolve into weakness at the touch of her. He had to be strong.

"I've got to tell you something, Jimmy," she said. "A year or so back I was in a party; a couple of airmen, myself and another girl and a man—

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you saw him last night. The fat man. There was an argument and someone stuck a knife into one of the fliers. Killed him. The fat man got me away. The other girl was a pick-up they had when they met me.

"I was in a terrible spot. If I gave myself up the least they would do would be to take away my yellow ticket, my identity. Without it I would be picked up every night by a patrol, maybe sent to a work camp. The fat man knew it. His silence was my pay and still is. I don't know who he is, but he knew you would be in last night. Don't ask me how he knew. He knows a great deal. And I'm afraid of him. More than anyone or anything else in this world. There are times I wish the Death would hit me while I was with him..."

"The whole thing was arranged then?" Jimmy asked.

"Yes. I said he knew you were coming."

"I could buy that. But what was he going to get out of me?"

She had regained her composure. "When he gets drunk he talks a little. Like last night. He said you and five others had been picked for a special mission. He wanted to know what that mission was."

He put his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels. His eyes searched the ceiling for an answer. "This fat friend of yours is a sort of miracle-man. He knows everything. Including something it was impossible for him to know. That I would fall for you."

SHE SHOOK her head. "He has never made a mistake. I know everything there is to be known about you. The whiskey you drink, for instance. About the affair you had when you were sixteen, the only time you had anything to do with a girl. I know what food you like, who your friends are, what your favorite sport is..."

"Food? I don't have any dislikes or favorites."

"You hate liverwurst and love French apple pie..." The startled look in his eyes showed she had scored a bull's eye. "...The fat man knew what would happen between us only he gave me more time. The business was to take about a week. Then I was to play you for what you knew."

"I'll believe everything you've said. Just tell me how he knew I was coming to *that* tavern last night."

"You killed your father at about five. At nine after Colonel Haynes gave you leave, you left the Flight Building on La Salle Street by the Jackson entrance. You started to walk east. A cab pulled up; it had been cruising behind you. You told the driver to take you to a tavern, any one..."

She didn't have to go on. She had been right to the last detail. She jumped as he slammed a fist home in a palm. His anger was so great she feared he was going to attack her.

"Okay. So he's a spy and a damned smart one. We've fought them to a standstill except for the Laughing Death. Well, maybe we'll beat them on that deal soon, too. Yes. I think we will."

"Jimmy... What about-what about us?"

"Us?"

"You said you loved me."

"I loved my father."

"But that was different..."

"Yes it was. He didn't know what he was going to do."

There was no question of his meaning. He might as well have struck her. She shrank against the arm of the sofa. Her voice was as dead as her eyes: "Go ahead. Turn me in. There is nothing I can do."

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"Don't be a fool," he spoke dispassionately. "If I turn you in there's nothing gained. The fat boy will know his game is over with me and try something else. We'll play it all the way to the hilt. All the way. I'm the sucker who rescued you. I'll play it that way."

"No!"

"Yes. The trouble with guys like the fat man they sometimes forget others have brains. Maybe even guys like myself. So here's how we'll do it. I'll get leave every night. And see you each night. In a week you'll report to the fat man that I'm hooked. Then we'll really get to work."

He bent, poured another drink for himself and downed it in a single swallow. It could have been mockery in his eyes. "Before you hang up the love sign for me again let's get something straight about that, too. A year after my puppy love affair I was in the air corps. After that, love, like our beer and smokes, was something the corps furnished us on our leaves from action. Free, for officers. Well, maybe it's something else too. Maybe it's hunger and desire, and wanting just to see cold blue eyes and feel warm red lips. See. Now I'm making speeches."

"You mean," she said, "that it was all an act with you?"

"It was with you," he reminded her.

"Oh-h!"

"Yeah. I, uh, have something to do. See you tonight..."

Five minutes went by after he left before she got up from the sofa. She moved slowly to the telephone and called a number. A man answered. "He's on the hook," she said, and hung up.

"SO YOU fellas are going to end the war real quick, now, eh?" the fat man asked.

"Yeah," Jimmy replied. "About time, too. We've got something good up our sleeves. Secret..." He hiccuped, turned to Nyra at his side and said: "Excuse me, honey. Must be the water they serve with the whiskey."

"Jimmy," she said. "Don't you think you've had enough?"

"'Nough? Don't be silly. They teach us to drink, in the air corps. Man can't drink a fi't, man can't fly. Rules."

"He's all right, Nyra," the fat man said. "So it's a secret."

"What's a secret?" Jimmy asked.

"This new weapon we're going to shoot at the damned Martians."

"Can't shoot nothin' at 'em. They got ray umbrella. Nothin' gets through. Suicide trying. We got one too, now. Chicago, New York, Cleveland, Los Angeles—all big cities. Can't get through ours, either. Stalemate. They got Laughing machine, though. Smart boys, those Martians."

"Yes. The papers are full of it. Terrible thing last week, in New York. Panic, and a hundred thousand people died. Terrible."

"Hey! I got good idea. Le's drink toast to new weapon. We ain't drunk enough toasts tonight. Waiter..."

The fat man almost smiled. "But we can't drink a toast to it unless we know what it is."

"No toast? Okay. But le's have another drink anyhow."

The smile died behind the leaden lids before it came alive. He looked at Nyra, shook his head in an imperceptible signal.

"Jimmy," Nyra said. "I'm tired. Take me home, please."

"Tired? So soon? Okay, honey. Nice meeting you, mister...?"

"Ellin..."

"...Ellin. Shorry I had to clip you last week. Nyra tells me wash all a mistake. Be seein' you, sir."

"Yes. We *will* see each other soon,"

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Ellin promised.

"HOW WAS I?" Jimmy asked drily.

"Very good. You would have fooled me."

"But did I fool him?"

Nyra shook her head. "I don't know. I don't know what goes on in his mind."

"H'mm! I think he was taken in."

"Why do we have to go through all this? He's a Martian spy. I'll swear it. Isn't that the simple way?"

"It would never work. Your word against his. We couldn't prove it. Besides, he would drag in the dead flyer and you would be on the fire. No. We'll give him enough rope. He'll hang himself."

"And maybe you," she warned him.

"Then we'll hang together."

"Let's talk about something else," she shuddered as if taken with a sudden chill. Her eyes were bright, dancing. "Y'know, Jimmy. Sometimes I smile to myself. I mean when I'm alone at night. Just to feel what it's like. And once, when my hand slipped and I smeared my lipstick, I laughed aloud. . ."

He stopped in the act of pouring cream in her coffee. Quite suddenly the lines were gone from his face. He looked like a boy watching a miracle take place.

". . .I'll never do it again," she continued. "I could never stand the terrible wait, wondering whether the Death was going to take me."

He finished pouring the cream. "Have you noticed," he said as he handed her the cup of coffee, "that there has been no mention of the Laughing Death in the papers during the last week?"

"No."

"I got the story today from Staff Information. A week ago today there was panic in New York. You read of it; it was in all the papers. Up to now the Death has been hitting individuals only. Something about no two humans having the same number of brain cells. Last week, however, twenty thousand people were affected simultaneously. Do you have any idea what that means?"

She shook her head.

"Simply this. They can concentrate the beam on any city and cause general insanity. They had found a means of getting to a collective group. Bongo! Our world goes smash. Then, suddenly, the beam went dead. No one knows about it yet. They're afraid to let the news out. It might be premature and if so the resultant disappointment would make havoc of morale. Maybe our fat friend knows why they've stopped."

"I imagine he does," she said.

"Think you can find out for me?" Jimmy asked.

"I don't know. . ."

"Try. It might make things go faster."

He left her on that note. And for the first time he found her lips without warmth when they kissed at the door. . .

THE WAITER acted as though he would have liked to sit in with them. They were all there, the fat man, the one with the scar on his hand, Nyra, and Jimmy Miden, in uniform.

". . .Pretty things, those decorations," the fat man said.

Jimmy's brows lifted. "I earned them—the hard way."

"I suppose," the other said. "A funny war. Nothing happens, but we're still at war."

"Maybe it'll end soon," Jimmy said. "The last Martian on Earth was captured the other day. There isn't a spot on the globe where they can land a

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ship anymore."

"So I heard," the fat man said softly.

"Shall I bring the drinks?" the waiter asked.

"Yes," Nyra said. "I feel like getting drunk tonight."

"Why?" the fat man turned to her.

"Do I have to have a reason?"

His reply was to the point: *"You* do."

"Well, I don't! I just feel like getting drunk."

"Oh. Miden..."

"Yes?"

"I want to warn you. She's hellish when she's drunk."

Jimmy let the remark go by. "There's been talk about our getting this secret weapon we have, off to Mars."

"And about time," the fat man sounded pious.

"There's one thing puzzles us. They've stopped beaming the Laughing Death at us and we can't figure why."

A change came over the fat man's features. They became set, a film came over the eyes, the lips tautened thinly. "Maybe I can tell you, Miden? Maybe they're waiting to find out what this weapon is? Maybe they're readying a last dose of the Death? Maybe they're waiting for the right moment, when the people are on the upswing?"

"Then they'd better hurry."

"What do you mean?"

"Sorry. Can't talk. Security reasons, you know."

"To hell with that! Talk!"

"Look, mister..." Jimmy said ominously.

"Please!" Nyra broke in.

"Keep out of this! He'll talk now. I've got him where I want him," the fat man growled. "And don't reach for your gun."

Jimmy felt the bite of the knife the other man was holding, through the cloth of his uniform. "Okay," he said lightly. "What do you want me to say?"

"Aah! Nyra, g e n t l e m e n—your drinks..." It was the waiter, in his right hand a tray holding a bottle and several glasses.

Their eyes had gone to the waiter. Jimmy acted with lightning speed. His left hand chopped down at the hand holding the knife while his right swept the bottle from the tray. It crashed and broke on the fat man's skull as Jimmy swept it downward. And once more Jimmy was dragging Nyra with him....

He didn't make it this time.

It was the waiter who stopped him. Jimmy was bent double, one hand on Nyra's wrist, when the waiter brought his knee up to the point of Jimmy's chin. He went backward and the man who had held the knife clamped a headlock on him. Jimmy didn't see who hit him. There was a bright light behind his eyes, and after, he was falling into a pool of darkness which lay just beyond his falling body.

"USE THE smelling salts," someone said.

Pain flickered in red flashes as Jimmy opened his eyes.

"...He's coming around," another voice said.

The pain was not so intense the second time Jimmy opened his eyes. He was in Nyra's room. They were all there, even the waiter.

His lips twisted wryly. "How nice," he said. "Everybody here."

He looked down and saw the rope around his bare chest. He moved his legs and felt the bonds against them. The fat man was standing before him. There was a bandage about his skull. He was holding a vial of smelling salts

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in one hand. He gave the vial to Nyra.

"Now then," the fat man said. "To the unfinished business. What kind of secret weapon are they flying to Mars?"

Jimmy told the fat man where to go. He sighed deeply, shudderingly as something burned the flesh on his back.

"What kind of weapon and when...?"

Jimmy tried to wet his lips but his tongue seemed as dry as his mouth.

"Give him some water," the fat man said.

The waiter stepped into the kitchen returned with a glass of water and hurled the contents into Jimmy's face.

"Talk, Miden," the fat man said. "You won't die. But you will wish you could."

"They tell me a man can go crazy with pain," Jimmy said. "I won't make sense then."

"Nyra! Come here!" the fat man said.

Before she could do more than protest he had seized her by her hair and forced her to her knees, facing Jimmy. "Andre! The iron..."

Jimmy saw what had burned him, when Andre passed him. The man was carrying a soldering iron with an extra-long cord.

The fat man bent and with a single motion tore the clothes from Nyra's upper body from her. The pink flesh, warm, breathtaking in its loveliness was exposed.

"Andre," the fat man was suddenly hoarse, excited. "Show Miden how you will go to work on him."

The iron was inches from her body when Jimmy bellowed: "Wait! I'll talk."

"Yes..." the fat man sounded as though he didn't want Jimmy to talk. His eyes were intent on the exposed body of the woman.

"They're flying tonight. Five of them. Special planes. There's a cone of light in the cowling of each plane. I don't know what it is but it can crack the ray umbrella they've set up on Mars. Whatever's in that cone will burn the planet to a crisp. And maybe the five planes with it."

"What time and how is it you're not with them?"

"They know about you, Ellin," Jimmy continued. "I told them. I was playing decoy tonight."

"What time are they leaving?" the fat man screeched.

"What time is it now?"

"Ten."

"At midnight."

"Ask him," Nyra's voice was quite calm, "why he's in uniform tonight."

"Of course," the fat man slapped his palm. "He's going too. Or was. He just wanted to play games tonight. Good! We'll help him. He'll still go. And we'll go with him."

But Jimmy was watching Nyra. She had gotten to her feet, stepped to the closet and pulled a blouse from a hanger and had donned it. She was smiling broadly into his eyes.

"Aren't you afraid of the Death?" he asked.

"We told them to turn it off," she said, "until we got word to them about this new weapon. I can even laugh."

"Yes. I suppose you can."

"No more talk," the fat man said. "We have two hours. To the field."

"Field?" Jimmy asked.

"Where your plane is waiting."

"But it's a military field."

"We know. They will let us in. We have friends there."

THERE WERE two guards at the far gate. They let them in without question and marched at Jimmy's side. The space ship gleamed silver in the light of the searchlight. The two

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men guarding the ship suddenly shot the light out.

"Inside," the fat man said in unhurried tones. "There's room enough for all."

Andre sat at Jimmy's side in the co-pilot's seat. The waiter stood over Jimmy's shoulder, a pistol pointing to the back of the uniformed man's head. The fat man and Nyra were sprawled on the floor. The ebony of outer space enveloped the ship. A very bright star was the Earth ten million miles away.

"How much longer?" the fat man asked.

"We'll be there in about four hours," Andre answered.

"Good! I couldn't stand much of this."

"Neither can I," Nyra said. "How's our friend doing?"

"He's all right. I'll take over in another two hours. The board on this ship is the same as any other. The switches are alike. I don't want him to try a suicide crash. So we'll remove temptation from him. I'll brake it in..."

Two hours later Andre tapped Jimmy's arm. "I'll take it from here. Go on back and sit down."

"Thanks," Jimmy said. "I was getting eye-tired."

"Well. You can sleep now."

"Do me a favor," Jimmy said as he spread out opposite Nyra and the fat man. "Wake me when we come in. I'd like to see a landing on Mars."

"Don't worry. We will," the fat man said.

"WAKE UP, Miden," the fat man said.

Jimmy blinked the sleep from his eyes. He smiled drowsily. "We there?"

"Almost," Andre said. "Ten thousand more miles. I'm in communication with them. They're going to open the ray umbrella for us."

"Good!" the fat man said.

Jimmy thought of something, narrowed his eyes in concentration then nodded in satisfaction. He began to talk:

"You kinda fooled me at the end, Nyra."

"I fooled you all the time," she said.

"No. Just at the end. I never believed a thing you said. Not after I found out about the murdered flyer. You killed him, Nyra."

"I suppose I might as well confess. Yes, I did."

"The thing that bothered me was the description of the killer. The woman had dark hair. When you mentioned the other girl I thought it might have been her. But there was only one woman with the two men. You! When Ellin pulled your head back I saw the dark hair at the roots. You're not a blonde, Nyra."

"...Ten minutes more," Andre called out.

"Blondes are cold. You should have known," she said.

"I suppose so. What are you to Ellin, Nyra?"

"His wife."

"Ah."

"...Six minutes more," Andre said.

"Funny. I never thought I'd fall in love with another man's wife. Maybe it's not funny. I don't know."

"Still in love?" she asked.

He was smiling. "Guys like me fall just once. It's for good."

"A pity. I tried to act the part."

"And very well, too. It really fooled me. But the funniest thing is what keeps running through my mind."

"Save it for later," the fat man was bored.

"...My father was telling us about this mission the other fellas are on. He said there was but one drawback to it..."

"...One more minute," Andre said.

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"...There was no way as yet of breaking through the ray umbrella over Mars. When that problem was solved we could go on. Then the Laughing Death hit him. I think he'd have been proud to know how I solved that problem."

"...Sky brake's on," Andre announced as he flipped the switch. He was grinning widely as he set the automatic pilot to position and came back to join the others.

"A little too late," the fat man said. "Those other ships will evaporate in the rays. Just like all the Earth ships do. All but this one. They're opening the umbrella to let us through, right now."

"I know," Jimmy said. He seemed quite pleased with himself. "I thought of the plan the day I told you I had recognized the waiter and the man with the scar on his hand. Remember, Nyra?"

"How can I forget?" she said. She was as bored as her husband.

"So I thought. If I can get these people to believe I'll fall in with them, string them along certain things will come to pass. I was right. Even to being kidnapped on this ship. Oh, by the way. This ship doesn't have the cone. None of them do."

"What do you mean, none of them? We knew this one didn't. One of the mechanics told us," the fat man said.

"He did. Bright fella. Only this isn't the ship he saw. This is that one's mate. This one has two engines. I better talk faster. We'll be landing soon... The second engine is really the most powerful broadcasting station the world has ever known. It is broadcasting right now. We had transcriptions of the sounds which cause the Laughing Death. Yes. We managed to make transcriptions of those sounds. They are being broadcast on Mars right now. The same rays as carry them to Earth will carry them to Mars. Our transmitter is not as powerful as yours. It can only operate in a short distance. It can..." Jimmy wet his lips. He wasn't making sense. Repeating the same things over and over. He felt a giggle in his throat but held it back.

"You're—lying," the fat man said breathlessly.

"No! Not now. I even figured someone like Andre might be along. The brake switch turned on the power for the transmitter. It won't be long. The other fellas will have a field day. They'll wait until the ray umbrella goes off. Crazy people do crazy things. Ha-ha. Oh, this is so damned funny."

Their eyes were wide and staring as Jimmy began to rock in wild laughter. Suddenly his laughter ended on a high sustained note. Saliva dripped from his mouth. He snarled and lunged at Nyra, his hand clutching for her throat.

She screamed and rolled from him.

There was a roaring sound and Jimmy sprawled lifeless at her feet. She looked up at Andre, a pistol in his hand.

"Thanks, Andre," she said. "Another second..."

Laughter gurgled from Andre's lips. It ended on a high note. There were three more shots. Andre was still laughing as he opened the hatch. A horde of screaming, laughing Martians pulled him from the plane and tore him to pieces, laughing insanely as they did....

THE END

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PLANET of Lost Men

Dirk Temple saved his life by landing at this strange spaceport—but when he found out what faced him there . . .

by P. F. COSTELLO

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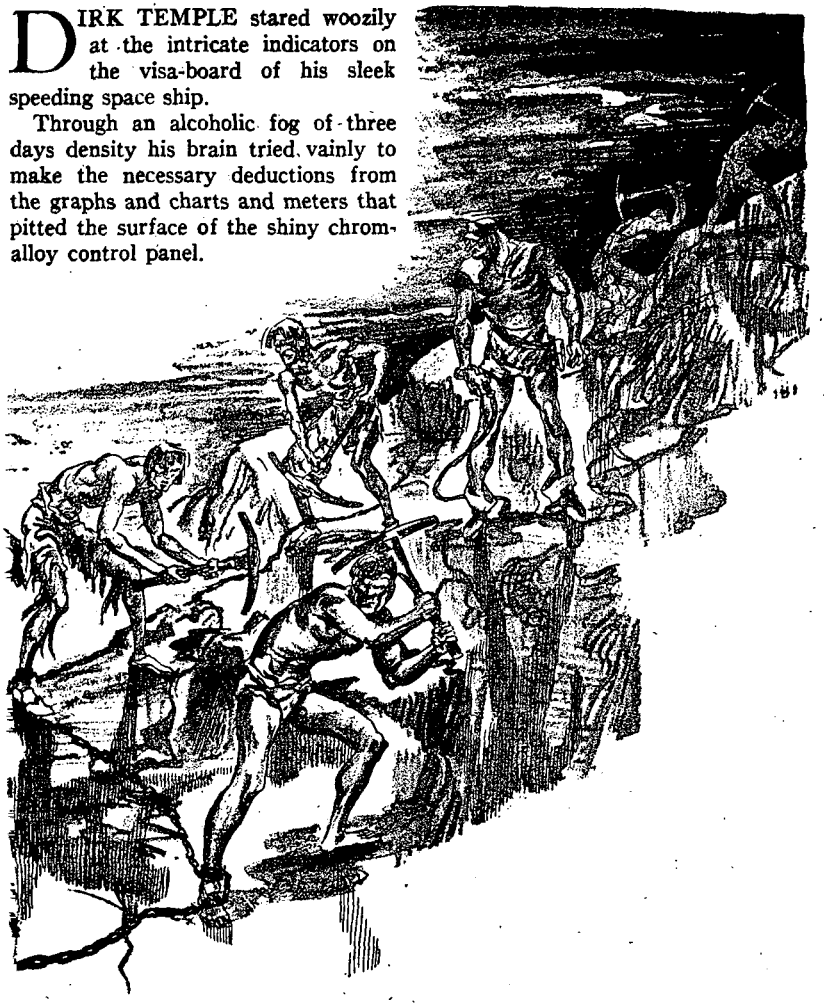
DIRK TEMPLE stared woozily at the intricate indicators on the visa-board of his sleek speeding space ship.

Through an alcoholic fog of three days density his brain tried vainly to make the necessary deductions from the graphs and charts and meters that pitted the surface of the shiny chrom-alloy control panel.



It was no go. The indicators bounced crazily before his blood-shot eyes confusing him hopelessly.

He leaned helplessly back in the pilot's chair of the trim single seater and came to a profound decision.

"I am drunk," he said aloud.

Pleased by his astuteness in figuring this out for himself he smiled genially and reached for the square bottle of Martian brandy beneath his seat. He lifted the bottle to his lips but only a few drops of the fiery liquor dribbled over his chin.

"Empty," he said profoundly. "Can't fool me."

He dropped the bottle and kicked the deceleration lever with his foot.

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As long as he didn't know where he was going there wasn't any particular hurry.

For three days he had been saturated with liquor and boredom. This particular binge had started at the swanky summer resort on Jupiter's cool side. It had no rhyme or reason, but then, few of Dirk Temple's actions ever did. Too much money, too much leisure, and too few responsibilities had turned him into a carousing, wasteful interplanetary playboy.

The stamp of his excesses was apparent in his blood-shot eyes, his flabby muscles and the petulant cast of his mouth and jaw.

The nose of the ship was dipping fast now, but Dirk was almost dozing in his seat. The ship continued to drop, and it was not until it had hissed into the atmosphere of the planet again, that Dirk's head snapped up.

A glance downward showed him the green sprawling expanses of Jupiter's unexplored areas, a vast plain of desolation and death. Cursing furiously Dirk manipulated the controls frantically. One rocket sputtered and missed and the ship lurched about in a wild arc as the remaining tube's off-balance bursts slewed the ship around.

For minutes Dirk fought the ship, trying to level it out and straighten its course. Sober, he might have accomplished something, but his drunken, confused efforts did more harm than good.

The ship continued its circling spin unchecked.

Dirk Temple decided his number was up. He didn't give a damn anyhow. Twisting in his seat he glanced out the pilot's sideview window, curious as to the exact terrain he had picked to honor with his last remains.

He stared downward, then shook his head and blinked. It wasn't possible—he peered downward again incredulously.

For spread out below him was a wide clearing containing a number of dwellings that looked about the size of toy blocks from his altitude. But more incredible than this—and more heartening—was the gleaming length of a mooring tower rising toward him. Two of the mooring sockets he saw were occupied by late style space craft, but several of the sockets were invitingly empty.

DRUNK as he was, and as unpredictable as his ship was, he brought it about in a fast circle and headed its nose for the nearest socket.

His timing and speed were off. As the nose of the ship plowed into the mooring socket he kicked the deceleration bar and slammed home the reverse rocket levers at the same instant. But not soon enough. The ship crashed hard and metal grated against metal with a crunching, rending noise.

Dirk's head snapped back with the impact, and a thousand firecrackers seemed to explode in his liquor-sodden brain. He slumped to the floor of the ship under a blanket of darkness.

"TOSS the drunken bum into a bunk. He's not hurt."

Dirk heard these words, heard the cold brutal voice of the speaker as if it were coming from a great distance. Through the black fog that blanketed his brain, a faint light was beginning to creep. He felt hands on either side of him, heard scuffled footsteps vaguely.

Weakly, he attempted to press his hands to his aching head.

"He's comin' around, Boss," a voice said next to him.

The footsteps stopped. Dirk realized that it had been his own footsteps as they led him along that he had heard. He shook his head and then opened his eyes.

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A huge, powerfully built man was standing in front of him, staring at him with an expression of sullen anger stamped on his coarse features. He wore boots, breeches and a leather shirt. Heavy, business-like atomic revolvers were strapped to his thick waist. His hands propped on his hips were the size of battered hams and his bare arms were like the limbs of a gnarled tree.

Beside him, Dirk noticed two other men, smaller, but equally villainous looking. They also carried guns strapped to their waists.

Strength was finding its way back into his numbed legs, and his head was clearing a little from the shock of the landing and the after effects of the Martian brandy. The men on each side of him were not holding him *up* any longer. They were just holding him.

"Start talking," the big man snapped. "What the hell do you want here? How'd you happen to moor here?"

Dirk passed a hand over his forehead and smiled.

"It was quite accidental, I assure you. I—I'd been drinking and my ship was out of control when I spotted your mooring tower. A lucky thing for me that I did."

"Maybe not," the big man said ominously. "We aren't hospitable to visitors here."

The smile faded from Dirk's face.

"What do you mean?" he asked, puzzled. "I'm sorry about smashing your mooring tower, but I'll make it right with you. My name is Dirk Temple. I'm good for any reasonable amount you say."

He glanced up to the top of the mooring tower appraising the damage done by his faulty mooring.

"A couple of thousand *tipecs** should take care of the damage," he said.

"So you're Dirk Temple, eh?" the big man said musingly. He flashed a quick meaningful glance at the two men who stood beside him. "In that case we'll do our best to accommodate you. You need sleep right now so I'll have you taken to a bunk. In the meantime we'll get your ship ready so that you can take off when you feel up to it."

"That's awfully nice of you," Dirk said, smiling. "I suppose I have been acting like a fool, trying to pilot a ship half drunk. A few hours sleep will fix me up though."

"Sure thing," the big man said. He turned to one of the men, a short, stocky blond with a broken nose. "Buck, take Mr. Temple to one of the rooms with a clean bunk. We'll let you know when we've got the ship in shape, Mr. Temple."

"Do that, will you?" Dirk said pleasantly. "And thanks a lot."

"Don't thank me," the big man said.

DIRK followed the man called Buck across the clearing. Houses made of tough, mahogany-like wood from the swamps of Jupiter were erected in a semi-circle, meeting at a huge, steel gate which led, Dirk guessed, to the open, unexplored regions of this section of the planet. The entire cleared stockade was surrounded by a high steel fence, and over its top Dirk could see tall rambling buildings. Except for the wooden dwellings in the stockade the only other object was the tall gleaming mooring tower. Long freight ramps connected with it and led off to a side gate in the stockade fence.

There was one wooden building larger than the rest, that was obviously some sort of office. Dirk wasn't particularly interested however, in anything but sleep.

His guide led him to one of the dwel-

*Tipecs—worth approximately five Earth dollars.—Ed.

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lings, opened the door and motioned him inside.

"There's a bed there," he said surlily. "Use it."

Dirk stepped into the room, saw a bunk in the corner and headed for it. His head was aching, and the effects of the Martian brandy had not completely worn off. Stretching out on the bunk he relaxed completely. He wondered idly for an instant about the peculiar place he had landed. The fences, the air of unfriendliness, the armed guards all added up to a big question mark in his mind. But he was too tired to worry about it. Even if he had been perfectly fresh, it is doubtful whether Dirk Temple, billionaire playboy, would have bothered about it. In a few seconds he was asleep.

TWO things awakened him. The first was a burning thirst, the result of his three-day binge on Martian brandy. The second was a dull thumping noise that seemed to be a part of the ground itself. It was rhythmic and unchanging, jarring slightly the supports of the bunk on which he was lying.

With some difficulty he struggled to a sitting position. Although his head still ached, it had cleared of the fuzzy alcoholic cobwebs. Except for a general muscular stiffness, he was as good as new. Which didn't signify much, he told himself wryly.

He stood up and walked to the door, wondering where he could get a drink. It was dark outside, but floodlights situated at the corners of the stockade provided adequate illumination.

Stepping through the doorway he became aware that the pounding noise emanated from out the stockade. The heavy steel main gate was open, he noticed. Hands in his pockets he strolled across the stockade and peered curiously through through the gate.

He saw then what caused the throbbing, tramping noise.

It was a group of men; row after row, slowly moving on the march. They passed silently past the stockade gate moving like robots. Dirk saw that they were shackled together by four-foot lengths of chain at the ankles. He was within twenty feet of the slowly moving lines of men, but not one man glanced in his direction. Their heads drooped forward, their shoulders slumped, they shambled along like walking dead men.

Somehow the spectacle gave Dirk a strange chill. If they had looked at him, or spoken, it might have been different. But their expressionless faces and silent, machine-like strides brought the hackles up on the nape of his neck.

For several minutes Dirk watched the rows of silent men file past him. Then he scratched his head and shrugged. It looked funny, but after all, it wasn't any of his business.

Turning he retraced his steps. He had not traveled more than fifty feet beyond the rows of wooden dwellings when a low, urgent voice sounded suddenly in his ear.

"Please! Please help me!"

Dirk halted abruptly, staring about.

"Here. Over here," the soft voice said anxiously.

DIRK turned, and following the sound of the voice, cautiously approached a darkened one-room dwelling which he had just passed. The building was somewhat in the shadow of the stockade lights but in the dim light he could make out a figure at the window of the dark hut.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Please believe me," the figure at the window said imploringly, "you're in serious danger. You must get away from here at once. Send the Federation Police back here, if you can. It's

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the only chance for any of us."

DIRK started in amazement as the voice reached him clearly. For it was a feminine voice, throaty and soft, but charged with terrible earnestness and fear. He stepped closer and saw a pale, delicately chiseled face turned toward him, and two dark eyes meeting his imploringly.

"What the devil!" he said explosively.

"Please be careful," the girl whispered frantically. "One of the guards might hear you."

"Somebody's going to hear from me," Dirk said grimly. "The idea of keeping a lovely girl like you worried and scared. What's wrong, anyway?"

"There's no time for that," the girl said breathlessly. "Just get away from here. Now. This instant. Send help back if you can."

"If you want to leave," Dirk said decisively. "I'll take you with me. I'll see that nobody shoves you around. I'm going to give the big slob that runs this joint a piece of my mind as it is."

"*Please!*" the girl's voice was desperate. "Don't go near him. Get away while you can."

"I wish you'd tell me what's up?" Dirk said.

"There's not time," the girl said desperately.

Dirk stepped closer to the girl. He noticed that she had light blonde hair, a big mop of it shoved back from her high, pale forehead. He could smell its subtle perfume on the dark air of the night.

"Don't worry," he said. His hand closed reassuringly over her small fingers. "When I'm ready to go I'll go. And I'll take you with me."

"Maybe!" a harsh voice snapped behind him.

Dirk wheeled, but a hard object jammed into his ribs.

"Behave," the owner of the voice said ominously. Dirk saw that it was the stocky, broken-nosed fellow called Buck who had surprised him.

"If this is your idea of a joke," he said angrily. "I don't like it. Take me to the person in charge of this place."

The atomic revolver jammed into his ribs.

"That's just what I was goin' to do."

The girl was looking at Dirk, a dull hopelessness in her eyes.

"Don't worry," he said confidently. "I'll have this whole business straightened out in a few seconds. Then I'll be back."

"This way," Buck snapped.

Dirk followed the man across the clearing to one of the larger rooms in which a light was burning. Buck opened the door and allowed Dirk to enter first.

Seated at a desk in the middle of the sparsely furnished room was the big man whom Dirk had seen on arriving.

"Found him talking to the girl," Buck explained. "From the looks of it she'd been singing. I guess he also saw the men leaving for work."

"That's too bad," the man behind the desk said cryptically.

"I demand to know what's going on here," Dirk blazed. "Who has been intimidating that young girl? What are all these men doing out here? There's something here that smells and I'm going to report it to the Federation the minute I get back."

"No," the big man said softly, "you aren't going to do any such thing. Because you aren't going back. Ever."

"ARE you crazy?" Dirk shouted.

The big man shook his head.

"I don't think so. I did intend to fix your ship up and let you leave. Be-

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cause the unexplained absence of Dirk Temple would be looked into. And I don't want anybody looking into things here. So I thought the thing to do would be to let you clear out of here, trusting on your drunken condition to prevent you from remembering much of the place. But since you've snooped around you know too much. My original charitable intentions have been changed. You stay here now for the rest of your life."

"The hell I do," Dirk exploded. "You can't get away with this. My disappearance won't go unnoticed."

"I'm going to risk that. If anyone did show up however, it is improbable that you'll still be around and kicking."

Dirk paled.

"Do you plan to murder me?"

The big man smiled.

"I have something better in mind. That soft flabby body of yours is going to be chained with a line of other slaves and made to work. You won't last long. Strong men last a year at the most. You'll cave in a few weeks. That will save me the bother of killing you and I'll also get some work out of your soft carcass."

"You can't do this," Dirk cried. "It isn't f—fair."

The big man stood up, stepped around his desk. His face was as hard and square as a ragged piece of granite.

"My name is Skarack," he said. "There's only one law here and that's me. You're my slave, body and soul, from this minute on. I'm going to work you to death and I'm going to enjoy doing it. Your money and your position and your fine friends will never help you now. You're a walking dead man from now on."

"You can't get away with this," Dirk cried.

Skarack smiled thinly. Then his heavy fist lashed out and slammed into Dirk's jaw. Dirk staggered back, crashed into the wall and slid to the floor. He was still conscious, but his head felt as if a mule had kicked it. Every muscle in his body seemed paralyzed. He tried to climb to his feet, but Skarack's heavy boot crashed into his ribs, drove the air from his lungs.

"Here I can get away with anything," Skarack said. He turned to Buck. "Put him in line and see that he learns how to work."

Buck grinned wolfishly.

"You bet," he growled.

Stooping, he slunk Dirk's limp body to his shoulders and lurched from the office.

THE next sensation that penetrated to Dirk's consciousness was the sound of monotonously shuffling feet, and the occasional metallic clank of chains. For a timeless interval he knew that and nothing more. Then he gradually became aware of his own forward motion. He was in line, chained to a man in front and another behind him, walking forward in jerky, robot-like motions.

But beyond these elementary realizations his mind was unable to travel. Like a man in a living dream he slouched along, jaw slack, eyes dull. He was chained. He was walking. That was all he knew.

Time passed. Finally the forward motion ceased. Like a soulless beast he stood in his fetters, without the will or inclination to move an eyelid.

Gradually his mind began to clear. The transition was not swift, but it was steady. He became aware of the men next to him, of guards, of vast expanses of rock spreading before his eyes.

"Get to work," a voice yelled.

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Dirk saw his fettered companions raise blunt instruments resembling pick-axes over their heads and attack the rocky soil with the sharp, scoop-like blade. There were other lines of men working other sections of the rock heap. Like twisted snakes the lines wound about, up and down hillocks, through stunted vegetation.

In his hands Dirk was aware was one of the picks. A black engulfing despair settled over his soul. Then bitterness flooded over him.

"I'll be damned if I'll work" he shouted. With all his strength he flung the pick away from him.

"Take it easy, friend," the man on his right cautioned in an undertone.

"Why should I?" he yelled. "I'm no slave. I'm Dirk Temple. I'll get out of here, I tell you. I'll get—"

"Watch it!" the man on his right hissed.

His warning was too late. Dirk had not seen Buck, the broken-nosed guard coming up behind him. He had not seen the cruel, blunt whip swinging.

All he knew was its sudden vicious bite as it slashed across his back. Again and again it fell wielded with all of Buck's strength and deliberate cruelty.

Dirk pitched to the ground moaning.

The lash contiued to rise and fall, until Dirk's back was criss-crossed with ribbon-like welts. Then it stopped.

"Now." Buck panted, "get to work."

It took Dirk minutes to crawl to his feet. Someone tossed the pick at his feet and he picked it up dully. He swung it once to the ground and almost cried out as his muscles worked under his frayed, stinging skin. But it was better to swing the pick and writhe with every movement than to provoke another assault by refusing.

THE man on his right spoke through set lips.

"It don't do no good to blow up. Keep your mouth shut and you'll live longer."

"Who wants to live?" Dirk almost sobbed.

The man on his right went on working without replying.

The day wore away. There was a brief pause about mid-day but no food was served. When the lines of shackled men were ordered to quit, Dirk's legs were trembling with fatigue. His lacerated back throbbed with excruciating pain. Blood was dripping from his finger tips, welling from his blistered, cut palms.

They filed along until they came to a metal doorway leading to one of the large sheds. Then the line slowed to a jerky crawl.

"Inspection" the man walking beside him grunted.

When Dirk reached the doorway he saw that a half-dozen guards with drawn atomic pistols checked the men in. One of the guards had a sponge-like object in his right hand. As each prisoner passed him he slapped him on the shoulder with object in his hand, and shouted out a number. Dirk was next in line.

"New one," the guard yelled.

Dirk was thinking of something that had eluded him all day. It was the girl. He remembered now his last words for her. "I'll be back for you." That's what he'd told her. A bitter smile touched his lips.

He stepped ahead, the guard's hand rose and fell. The sponge-like object pounded into his shoulder. A swift tingling raced through his body, as if invisible hot needles were probing his body, for nerve centers. He started to wheel, an angry yell forming on his lips, but he didn't.

He plodded on instead, his jaw slackening, his eyes glazing. He knew noth-

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ing else until he came around from his strange torpor and discovered that another day had dawned.

He was shackled to the same line of convicts, his pick was in his hands and a snarling voice was yelling:

"Get to work!"

"Surprised?" it was the clipped voice of the convict on his right. Dirk noticed that he was a small, compactly built man of almost middle age.

He swung his pick twice before answering:

"Yes. What is it?"

"Electrical hypnosis." The answer was swift. "Sponge in guard's hand is studded with quills. Shoots a charge into us, knocks us out. Keeps us from planning, talking, thinking about getting away." *

"Just work and then a complete blank-out," Dirk grated bitterly. "I'll be glad when I blank-out for good." But he was thinking about the light-haired girl when he spoke, and he wondered if he meant it.

In the next week Dirk learned much from the prisoner chained to his right. The man's name was Vyers and he explained the incredibly brutal and inhuman system which Skarack operated.

Through an arrangement with corrupt officials at the great prison base of Plubium, which was only sixteen hours from this section of Jupiter, Skarack had managed to have hundreds of convicts shipped to his mining settlement. The prison wrote the men off the records as having died, but actually they went to the living death that Skarack had arranged for them. Without the overhead of labor he was able to make fabulous profits from his mineral mines.

The tip of Dirk's pick bit deeper into the rocky soil as he thought of it. There was a new set to his jaw and a strange glint in his eyes that had not been there before.

"I'll live," he muttered to himself. "If I have to wait a hundred years I'll pay him back."

"No," Vyers shook his head briefly. "You won't. The constant electric hypnosis will kill you in about a year. No one can last longer than that. Then there will be more convicts to replace us."

Dirk slammed the pick into the ground and the stout handle almost splintered under the impact.

A LONG one hundred and eight-day Jovian "month" passed without change. The convicts labored, were knocked out electrically, labored again. Some died. Others came.

Dirk Temple continued to swing his pick savagely. His hands were as tough as alligator skin, and his complexion was blackened by the sun. The bloat of dissipation had melted from him, leaving him clean-limbed and powerful. These were the physical changes. Something had happened inside Dirk that no one could see. It was something that grew from a white hot core of hatred into a mighty force of determination that was as inevitable in its way as a waterfall. It showed itself in the grim smile that hovered on his lips. In his silent acceptance of the lashings that fell to him. But most noticeably it was evident in his eyes. They were like the windows of Hell; awful in their cold, deliberate, flaming hatred.

The only soft thought that entered his mind was that of the girl he had seen so briefly his first night in this

* The exact nature of the "electrical hypnosis" is, of course, unknown, but it was probably not hypnosis at all, but a form of nervous shock that rendered the nervous system incapable of conveying messages for a period of hours, with a resulting apparent state of unconsciousness. Obviously, however, subconscious nervous functioning was not impaired, or death would have resulted. The victim would have "forgotten" to breathe.—Ed.

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morass of misery. He thought of her, not as living, but as belonging to his own dead past. Something beautiful and tender that had been destroyed.

His pick slashed into the ground.

"One more score," he muttered.

When he jerked his pick loose he noticed a few green threads of moss clinging to it. With his next blow he uncovered a patch of the peculiar Jovian creeping moss. It was wiry, hardy stuff, its thin individual filaments tough as strands of steel.

"Vyers," he said tensely. An idea had struck him with the suddenness and force of a lightning bolt.

Vyers glanced up.

"Yes?"

"Will this moss conduct electricity?" his voice was strained.

Vyers shrugged.

"Maybe, maybe not. Why don't you try it?"

"I'm going to," Dirk snapped. "Listen to me. I'm going to make a pad with this stuff, shove it under my jacket. Maybe I won't be blanked out tonight. That's all I need. One night."

"You're mad!" Vyers hissed. "You'll be caught. Killed."

"Fine," Dirk's eyes glowed. "That's where I can't lose. Either way I'm better off. Want to try it with me?"

"No," Vyers said nervously. "No!"

But that evening as the line of prisoners wound past the guards there were *two* convicts with slightly padded right shoulders. Vyers went through first. Then Dirk stepped up. His number was bawled out, the guard's hand whacked him on the shoulder. Dirk's body stiffened to resist the customary sensation, but with a sudden wild feeling of delirium, he noticed that the usual effects were lacking. He started to step on, but the guard's command halted him, nerves quivering.

"Hold it you. What's wrong with that shoulder?"

Dirk turned slowly, feigning stupor.

"Hurt," he mumbled, "Fell on rock."

His hands curled into fists, as he watched the guard through lidded eyes. He was prepared to fight now, regardless of outcome.

The guard hesitated an instant, then waved him on.

"Don't be so damn clumsy," he shouted after him.

Dirk slouched on, careful to affect the drugged walk of the other prisoners. But his heart was pounding madly with excitement and hope.

IN THE central eating room which Dirk remembered but dimly and foggily the prisoners were unshackled. Food was set before them and soon the air was full of the sounds of greedy feeding.

Dirk kept his head over his plate pretending to eat ravenously. Guards walked back and forth behind the diners, occasionally shoving a drugged prisoner's head into the sloppy stew just to hear him grunt and strangle.

The meal was finally over. The men were led to their bunks. Dirk climbed in as did the rest. Through the meal he had not attempted to catch Vyer's eye, for one glimmer of intelligence on the part of a prisoner would be an instant give-away to the guards.

Now he waited tensely till the guttural snores of the men would cover any noise he might make, then slipped from his bunk.

Instantly a shadowy figure joined him. Vyers!

They did not speak. One iron handshake was all they needed. Then they moved as silently as wraiths through the sleeping room, into the eating room. In Dirk's mind was only one desire. And that was to feel Skarack's writhing throat under his hands.

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He motioned Vyers to additional caution as they approached the large doors that led from the eating room. There was a guard stationed outside this door. Little vigilance was exercised over the electrically drugged prisoners.

This was one thing Dirk was counting on.

He shoved the door open a cautious inch. The guard was *not* sleeping. He was pacing up and down before the door and he wheeled, swinging his gun up as it opened slightly.

"Who is it?" he snapped.

To close the door would be an invitation for him to throw the great bolt in place and sound an alarm. Dirk did the only other thing possible. He hurled the door wide open and lunged with the speed and ferocity of a tiger at the startled guard.

His furious driving lunge carried him to the guard's throat before the deadly atomic pistol could be brought into action. It was over then in an instant. Dirk's gnarled, powerful hands contracted like the segments of a vise, and the guard's eyes rolled desperately. With a final wrench Dirk stood up.

Vyers grabbed the corpse by the feet and dragged it into a shadow.

They were outside the prisoner's quarters now. The stockade fence faced them, high and impassable. The gate was heavily guarded with a half dozen armed guards.

But Dirk had been doing a little thinking.

"The side gate by the freight ramp," he snapped. "It's almost deserted now because there hasn't been a shipment in months. Let's try it."

It took them twenty minutes to skirt the fence and reach the side gate, but when they did a glance showed them their efforts had not been wasted. The gate was not guarded, and it was covered with tough, thick creepers that wound all the way to the top of the fence.

HAND over hand the two figures went up the twelve-foot gate. Stuck into Dirk's belt was the guard's atomic pistol. Its cold, heavy bulk was reassuring.

They dropped to the ground, crouched still for an instant to make sure their descent had gone unnoticed, then started off. They had circled half way around the stockade making for Skarack's office when Dirk stopped. He was standing in front of the dwelling where he had seen the blonde-haired girl. Motioning Vyers to wait he stepped to the door. What he was doing was wild and crazy but he couldn't stop himself.

The door was fastened from the inside. He hesitated for a brief fraction of a second, then moved his shoulder slowly, but inevitably against the door. If anybody else were inside, he decided simply, he would kill him.

For a while the door held, then a bolt shattered and Dirk slipped swiftly into the room.

"Don't scream," he said. "Please don't."

He couldn't see her, but he knew she was present. Her subtle, warm fragrance was everywhere in the room, a part of it.

"W—who is it?" the question came from the opposite side of the room.

"Don't you remember?" he whispered. "I'm the fellow who said he'd be back. I always keep my word."

A sound like a sob came from the girl.

"Thank God," she said softly. "I thought you'd been killed long ago. But how are you here?" there was swift alarm in her voice.

"Escaped," Dirk said briefly.

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"We've gone as far as we can right now. It's farther than we hoped to get. Our next stop is Skarack. When I'm through with him I don't care what happens to me"

"Or anyone?" she asked.

He was silent. Then:

"How did you come here?"

"My father owned this property at one time," she answered. "Skarack was his foreman. I was in school on Earth and my checks always came from here promptly. What I didn't know was that father had died years ago and that Skarack had taken over, even to the extent of seeing that my checks were mailed to keep me from becoming suspicious. Finally I got lonely, jumped in a one seater and started off for here without letting anyone know where I was going. When I found out the truth Skarack refused to allow me to leave. He's made me offers, but I've told him I'd rather kill myself."

Dirk couldn't think of anything to say.

Vyers stuck his head in the door.

"Hurry up," he whispered, "we haven't got much time left."

"If there was any way at all of licking Skarack *and* his mob," Dirk said, "I'd take it. But there isn't. That's why we're concentrating on him."

"Just a minute," Dirk heard the girl slip from her bunk, cross to him. "There *is* a chance if you want to take it. All you need is more alive, alert men. Well, Skarack has a solution that will break the electric hypnosis. He perfected it in case he ever had to move the men or put them to work after they'd been drugged. He told me this one night when he was drunk. That same night I stole a bottle of the drug, hoping I'd get a chance to slip it to someone who could get it to you, or maybe some other prisoner."

"I don't get what you're driving at." Dirk frowned.

"Just this," the girl said breathlessly. "If I gave you the drug and you could slip back and awaken a dozen more men you'd have a chance to overthrow Skarack's entire horrible system here. If you just get him, someone will take his place and these hundreds of helpless men will be no better off. You can take your private revenge if you wish, but you won't be satisfying anyone but yourself."

"It's an awfully long gamble," he said grimly.

"Maybe I haven't the right to ask you to take such a chance," the girl said softly.

"You can ask me anything," he snapped, "anytime, anywhere. Anybody with your guts doesn't need to apologize for asking someone else to take a risk. Give me that bottle of dope."

The girl uttered a happy, choked cry and slipped away from him. She returned in an instant and thrust a slim vial into his hands. A hypodermic needle was strapped to the bottle.

"Good luck," she whispered.

He kissed her then.

"I'll be right back for you," he said, "and remember—I always keep a promise."

Wheeling he slipped out the door, pulled Vyers into the shadow of the hut and hurriedly explained the new situation to him.

"It's a chance," he said grimly, "for everybody."

"What're we waiting for?" Vyers snapped.

AN HOUR later Dirk opened the huge eating room door cautiously and peered out. The stretch approaching the stockade fence was clear. Turning he motioned with his hand, then stepped through the open door.

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Vyers was at his heels. Following Vyers in close formation came twelve crouching shapes, armed with picks and clubs.

The serum had worked swiftly. Dirk and Vyers had selected the hardiest and gamest of the prisoners to administer the counteractive drug to. The men aroused from the stupefying effects of the electric discs had been hard to restrain. Once they realized that they were free they wanted to charge Skarack's office and tear the man to pieces.

Now Dirk paused, held up a hand. The shadowy shapes behind him froze into rigidity.

"What is it?" Vyers asked.

"Look!" Dirk pointed to the main gate. "The guards have evidently turned in. Maybe a surprise attack at that point will turn the trick for us."

"Long shot," Vyers muttered.

"What isn't?" Dirk snapped. "Come on!"

Slinking across the lighted areas like stalking wolves the small band reached the shadow of the fence and followed it to the main gate.

Dirk stole forward alone then. He tried to keep himself from dwelling on the tremendous stakes of this game he was playing. His own life was insignificant, but the courageous girl and the men who trusted him had to have a break. He couldn't let them down.

Crouching before the gate Dirk racked his brain for some method to storm the unguarded entrance. With the futility of desperation he leaned against the massive gate and shoved with all his strength.

Then his heart leaped for the gate gave way under his shoulder and swung slowly inward. Trembling with excitment Dirk waved to the line of crouching silent men.

"We've got a chance now," he hissed as Vyers crept alongside him. "Stick right behind me and be prepared to scatter and fight on the inside."

Cautiously he shoved the heavy gate open, stepped into the the stockade. All was quiet and still. He panthered cautiously ahead, the ragged horde of prisoners at his heels.

His eyes raked over the seemingly lifeless buildings.

Suddenly he wheeled, shouted at his men.

"Get out! It's a trap!"

But he was too late. The massive stockade gate was already swinging shut and, from behind it, a dozen guards sprang. Their revolvers were out, ready for instant action.

Dirk cursed bitterly, but he saw instantly that resistance would be worse than useless. His whole being raged at the realization that they had been easily and stupidly trapped. But there was nothing to be gained by lunging at the guards. It would only bring a fiery rain of atomic pellets on all of them.

"Easy men," he cautioned. "They've got us."

"Drop your weapons," one of the guards ordered.

SULLENLY the men dropped their picks and clubs to the ground, and with them dropped their own hopes. They stood stolidly grouped together now, lips twisted bitterly.

To their right a door banged open, then a familiar voice snapped over their heads.

"You scum are more stupid than I thought. You've proved it by pitting your puny wits against mine."

Dirk turned slowly. In the door of the office stood Skarack, his immense bulk filling the opening. A red river of hate was coursing through Dirk's veins. Fists clenched, he strained toward Skarack, but Vyers jerked him

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around.

"Fool," he hissed. "He's waiting for a chance to burn you."

Skarack strolled into the storckade before the helpless prisoners, thoroughly enjoying the moment of triumph. Two of the guards stationed themselves on either side of him, covering the ragged prison horde with their atomic pistols. The remaining guards shoved their guns back into their holsters and started to collect the picks and clubs.

"You stupid, spineless curs," Skarack's voice lashed at them, "Did you think you'd get away with this thing for even a second? I can't believe you're that moronic. I know everything that's done or said here."

Vyers gripped Dirk's arm.

"The girl," he grated. "She ratted on us. You were a fool to go near her, to trust her."

"No," Dirk said desperately. "No. She can't be in on this thing. She wouldn't sell us out."

"Shut up," Skarack roared. "I'm talking. I want to know the ring leader of this business. Any man who tells me will go free. The rest will be returned to work. I just want the name of the man who started this. I don't give a damn about the rest. All right. Speak up!"

A heavy silence answered him.

"I'll give you till I count three to talk," Skarack said grimly. "If no one has unbuttoned his yap by then I'll give my men orders to fire into the lot of you."

He held up his hand.

"One!"

Dirk smiled, a lean bitter smile.

"Two!" Skarack shouted.

Dirk started to step forward, but suddenly a feminine voice said,

"I can tell you the name of the ring leader!"

Skarack wheeled, as did Dirk and the prisoners, toward the voice.

Dirk felt the blood turn cold in his body. The blonde girl was standing in the doorway of her wooden dwelling, smiling provocatively at Skarack.

Vyers swore furiously.

DIRK felt a sickness and weakness over his body. The girl *was* in with Skarack. She had listened to his plans, talked him out of killing Skarack when there was a chance that it might have succeeded. Instead she had persuaded him to assemble more men, waste more time. Then she had tipped off Skarack as to what was brewing. Now she was completing her day's work by putting the finger on him.

"You know something about this?" It was Skarack speaking. He sounded strangely skeptical.

"Sure thing, big boy," the girl smiled. She stepped from the doorway and walked toward him, her slender body swaying enticingly. "I heard a few things that might interest you. After all you're the brains of this place and you'd know best how to use information like this."

"So you're getting smart, eh baby?" Skarack chuckled.

The girl walked behind the first guard, and Dirk suddenly noticed that her right hand was concealed in the folds of her dress. His muscles tensed. Maybe . . .

The girl moved swiftly. Her hand swung at the guard's shoulder. Skarack bellowed in surprised rage and leaped for her, but the girl ducked his flailing arms and dove at the other guard, swinging her arm again in a wide arc that connected with the guard's back.

Skarack leaped for the girl, swinging. His ham-like paw struck her a glancing blow on the shoulder, knocking her sprawling to the ground. He wheeled, shouting at the guards, his own hands

(*Concluded on page* 121)

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SIGNAL POINT IN SPACE

by CHARLES RECOUR

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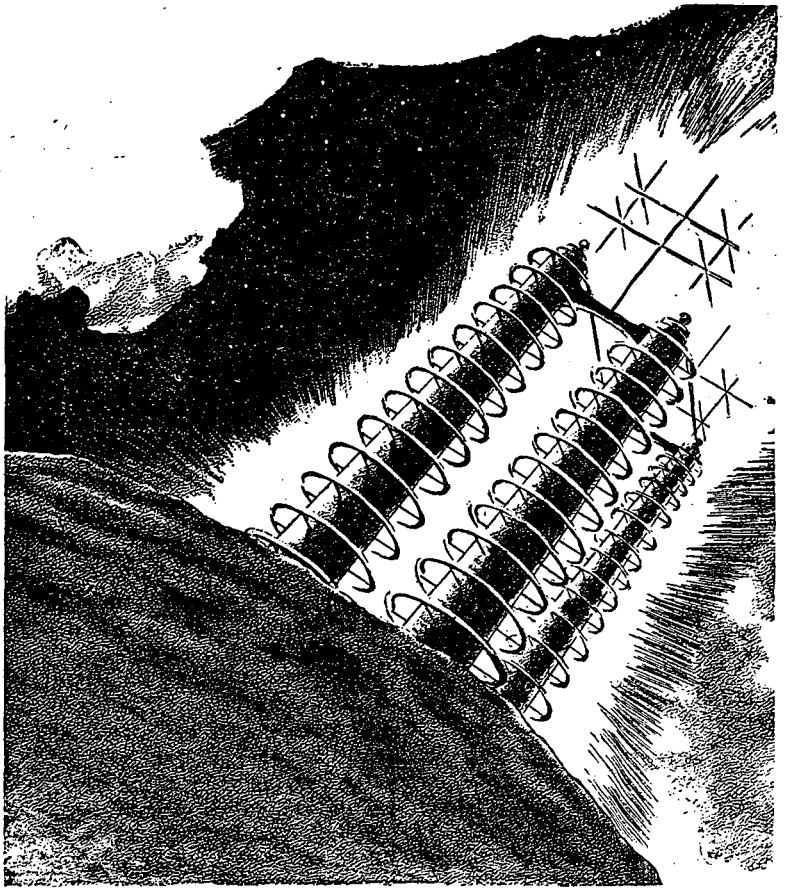
The satellites served faithfully as signal points in space, guiding ships to a safe landing. Then one day the station on Phoebe was silent . . .

"The success of the commerical, industrial and economic exploitation of the entire Solar System is due, in no small measure, to the superb communications systems that were in existence even at that time. The men who manned those stations were persons of magnificent courage."

Lenner's HISTORY

DON MANNING manipulated the screw driver carefully and the contacts of the little relay closed quickly and silently. He straightened up from the bench over which he was leaning and breathed a sigh of relief. "These things were supposed to be foolproof," he said cynically. "About as foolproof as my



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—grandmother's clock!"

It was the work of a very few minutes to replace the relay in position, connect its contacts, and put it into operation. Don glanced out the port and even though the visibility was extremely bad he could see the heated paraboloid once again begin to rotate smoothly and effortlessly. Breathing easier, he sat down at the small table that served as workbench and desk and dining-room, and poured himself a fresh cup of coffee. He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, took a sip of the coffee and then leaned back with the satisfied air of a man who has just done a good job and knows it.

His eyes wandered again to the port. Through it, vaguely and tenuously he could see the rotating antenna. He felt strangely akin to it. In its majestic rotation, in its immutable spinning, he saw himself mirrored.

It seemed to symbolize him and his work. Like it, he was condemned—he smiled at his mind's use of the word "condemned"—to perform his monotonous task ceaselessly and faithfully. It was hard for him to imagine he was important or that anything depended upon him.

SIX MONTHS ago he had graduated in theoretical physics back on Earth. But his intense interest in the subject demanded that he do graduate work. Unfortunately as in all things, money was a prime requisite. So he decided to postpone further work in school for a while. Then he started to look for a job. A friend of his called his attention to a number of Government positions that were open for men with a good background in Electronic Engineering. He had investigated the matter and found that technicians were needed to man the Navigational Signal Points.

Don had jumped at the chance. The pay was extremely good, as befitted the job which was monotonous, unglamourous—and dangerous. In a short while he was aboard a space ship of the Patrol bound for Phoebe, the outermost satellite of Saturn. Here he would be stationed for a year or more, with no company save the radio contacts he made in the course of duty. It was the function of these Signal Points to provide radio beams for the orientation of space craft. His job was to keep the station operating at all times, sending out its pulses of electromagnetic radiation much as the earlier lighthouses on Earth sent out their beams.

It required a skilled man, one familiar with radio equipment, to maintain these Signal Points. Don fitted the picture perfectly. There were some disadvantages to this lonely post on Phoebe though.

Those Signal Points on satellites and asteroids of the inner planets were very busy continually making radio contacts with the great mass of transport vessels that traveled between Earth, Mars and Venus.

The outposts on the Outer Planets, however were another matter. They were truly lonely and isolated. Travel was rare. The Outer Planets were uninhabited and almost unhabitable—so far as the few exploring parties had discovered. Yet, Signal Points had to be maintained for the use of these infrequent visitors and also for the exploration craft that occasionally made the long trip.

Through the ring of heated quartzite ports, Don could now see his antennae performing their silent duty of sending out pulses of radiation. The Signal Point vibrated very slightly to the humming of the powerful electrical generators beneath his feet, driven by their miniscule

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atomic power plants.

Night and day made no sense on this timeless world. Don glanced at the clock which regulated his living. Time for inspecton, he thought. I'll give the stand-by generator another shot of lubricant, just in case.

Suddenly the red light above the monitor-receiver flashed. Don stepped over to the scanning radar and punched the button. Overhead he could visualize the paraboloid that was the antenna oscillating in its pecular pattern as it scanned the cone of space overhead. Hunched over the console, Don watched the twenty-inch screen carefully. Then it appeared. A tiny pin-point of light in one corner of the screen. He knew it was moving rapidly but that it was so remote it only appeared to be quiescent.

He glanced over to the wall to see if the monitor-receiver was on. It was but the speaker remained silent. He picked up a microphone and spoke into it.

"This is Signal Point One—Phoebe. This is Signal Point One—Phoebe. I have picked you up on my radar screen. Please acknowledge. Please acknowledge contact."

EXPECTANTLY Don awaited an answer. Regardless of the frequency used by the strange vessel, his receiver would sweep it up. A minute passed. Then five—then ten. Still no answer. Don was puzzled. It was a rigid requirement that any vessel answer a Signal Point's call. This stranger chose not to. Or perhaps something was wrong.

He set a tape on the transmitter sending out the calls. He knew that the strange ship should have first contacted him on the pulse beam without waiting for him to pick up the craft personally. He noted the contact in the log, checked to make sure his transmitter was working, and then resumed his inspection.

A half-hour later when he reappeared in the control room he saw that still no answer had been received. Now the strange ship was nearer. Why the radio silence, he asked himself? It didn't make sense.

It was the first unusual incident Don had encountered in his six-months of service. Previously the few contacts he had made had responded instantly and had asked for locations or other information. But he had been well briefed on operating procedure. He put the information on a beam and radiated it into space as regulations demanded. If any patrol craft was in the vicinity—which was unlikely—they would pick it up and relay it in a series of jumps back to Earth.

Don ignored the ship on the radar screen and the silence of the receiver, although periodically he couldn't refrain from glancing at it.

Another day passed. Now the ship loomed on the screen. From its outlines, Don could classify it. It was a very small ship little larger than a lifeboat, which could account for a damaged transmitter.

Turning up the amplification of the video pick-up, Don could see that the small ship appeared to have undergone some drastic accident for its outer hull was blackened and burnt and the skin appeared twisted in spots.

By plotting its course it was clear that the craft was heading straight toward Phoebe. Although he remained conscious of the ship through the rest of the time, Don continued his routine duties.

The next time he looked at the screen, the little blob of light was gone. He made a last effort to con-

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tact it but realized that it was a futile gesture. The ship had undoubtedly passed into the radio shadow of the satellite. Don shrugged his shoulders. He had done all that was required of him. But there was a gnawing little voice in the back of his mind which still expressed curiosity about the whole affair.

THAT NIGHT he awoke with a start. He sat up in his bed, listening. The alarm was ringing. The monitor must have latched onto a signal. He raced toward the communications room. A red light glowed over the sensitive receiver and the buzzer rang intermittently.

Don turned up the gain of the receiver. Faintly through the sputtering and crackling he detected the standard emergency distress signal. It was faint and weak as if coming from a great distance. The directional antenna outside swung and oscillated as it waveringly sought out the line of maximum intensity.

Don's eyebrows lifted. There was nothing on the radar screen and the directional antenna indicated that the signal was coming from a point that couldn't be far off! Then it flashed into his mind. The ship had landed or crashed on Phoebe and probably wasn't more than a matter of miles away from the Signal Point! This was undoubtedly an emergency transmitter operating, which would account for its feebleness in the ammonia laden atmosphere of Phoebe.

Don dressed rapidly, slipped into a space suit, a metal-fabric monstrosity, and went over to the emergency airlock. The little ship resting inside was a standard lifeboat, an ovoid of steel twelve feet long with an unbroken surface save for the quartzite ports for observation, and the directional antennas of its radio equipment.

Don closed the inner door of the airlock. He had no fear for the station —its equipment was fully automatic and would operate indefinitely unless some major breakdown should occur. And he'd be back long before then. He stepped into the little space boat, pressed the button that sent a pulse into the electrical outer door and as it swung open, he fed a little power into the jets. It slithered out into the mad maelstrom of ammonia-methane wind and was borne away like a chip on a stream.

Skillfully Don manipulated the controls and brought the little vessel into some semblance of order. Visually, he was blind. It was impossible to peer through the white madness outside. The station vanished, existing for him no longer except as a little lightblob on the radar screen,

He set the receiver for the distress frequency he had picked up and was rewarded by the metallic tone coming in feebly. After half a dozen false starts he managed to orient the beam. Slowly then the signal increased in intensity.

In the blinding storm it was impossible for him to see anything and his navigation had to be done completely from instruments. If his antennas had not been electrically heated they would have long since been so encrusted with frozen ammonia that they would have been useless.

Automatically Don's transmitters were answering the distress call but from the fact that it didn't change, he concluded that either there was no transmitter on that end that could be modulated by voice or tone, or that the victims didn't know how to operate one.

AFTER TWENTY minutes of creeping through the poisonous

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atmosphere of frigidity, the distress signal was so strong, Don knew that he was almost directly over the craft. He turned on the video-scanner but saw nothing but blizzard. Now it was a matter of descending very slowly until something became visible.

Soon he felt the gentle bump. The spaceboat was down. The video screen was a distorted hash of interference but Don could see the bulky object alongside which his little ship was laying. He wriggled through the air lock, and with one hand touching the side of the wrecked space-ship he guided himself around it. It was not a large vessel, and it had been attacked by something for its surface was badly dented and corroded. He found the air lock.

Using a hand gun he pounded on the side of the air lock. Its controls swung it open as someone inside pushed a button. Don stepped through. The door swung shut. He spoke into his suit microphone.

"Don't open the inner lock," he said, "until the frozen ammonia has evaporated from my suit."

"All right," a voice crackled in his earphones, "say the word."

Don waited a few minutes until he was clean. "Blow it free," he said, and a blast of air in answer to his command swept through the lock clearing it of the poisonous vapors. The inner lock opened up and Don entered the control room of the wrecked space ship.

He found himself facing a suited figure in whose hands a rifle was held.

The stubby weapon with the huge magazine was pointed directly at his middle. Through the helmet slit and behind the quartizite lenses Don found himself staring into a pair of clod blue eyes. In back of the standing figure lay another suited body, inert and evidently injured for it did not move.

"Wait a mnute," Don protested, "put down that blaster. I'm Don Manning from the Signal Point. I'm here to lend a hand."

The muzzle of the rifle sank. Don reached up and wrenched off his helmet. The suited figure put down the weapon and did the same.

Don's eyes widened as a shock of golden-yellow hair tumbled down around the figure's shoulders.

"I'm sorry," the girl said apologetically, I'm Barbara Ross. I thought you were Black or Jetson or one of their boys. I caught your signals, but I couldn't reply. The radio equipment was knocked out. When I hit here I managed to throw a single tube oscillator together."

"That's why your signal was so weak—it's a miracle it got through this atmosphere."

"It's a miracle we—I—got here at all," the girl agreed soberly. "I know very little about navigation—especially under fire. That reminds me, I'd like to get out of here—but fast—before they find me. Can we leave now?"

"Certainly," Don agreed, "but what about him?" He pointed to the prostrate figure.

"He's dead." She said simply, but her eyes blinked rapidly as if to keep from crying. "My uncle, Dr. William Ross—oh, we were such fools," she cried bitterly, "we shouldn't have done this ourselves."

Don looked at her mystified.

"I'll explain it all as soon as we get out of here," the girl said. She put on her helmet, picked up a small box and went to the air lock. Don followed her, tightening his helmet as he went. He stopped, turned and walked over to the prone figure. When he got close to it, he could see

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the ragged rent in the helmet where something powerful had sheered it off along with a portion of the skull.

In a few minutes the two of them were in Don's space boat. As Don took over the controls and started back toward the Signal Point, the girl began speaking.

"I can appreciate your confusion," she began, "so I'll try to give you the story. It's a simple one too. Dr. Ross was a mineralogist. He suspected that from a geological study of the conditions on Iapetus, Iapetan diamonds would be found. He fitted out the ship you saw back there and I went with him. I wanted adventure—" she smiled wryly, "—and I got it. We found the stones all right." She opened the small box Don had seen her take with her. He peered into it. In it, thrown together like pebbles, was a collection of brilliant and flashing diamonds. He whistled.

"But," she continued," at the Iapetan base, Uncle William talked too much. Black and Jetson, so-called salvage men—found out about the collection. They tried to capture us, but we got away in time. They followed us and cut us up pretty badly. You saw what the Gloaming looked like. Then Uncle William was killed by a chance shot. I managed to outrun them and I headed for the nearest beam—which happened to be yours. My radio equipment was destroyed and even before it was wrecked Uncle William and I were unable to raise any patrol ships. You know the rest. I practically crashed here."

Don told her about himself then, and as he talked, his hands automatically manipulated the controls that held the space boat on a straight course through the blinding frozen ammonia wind.

Suddenly his narrative stopped. For simultaneously the beam went out. An instant later it cut in again and Don knew that the emergency sender had taken over. Quickly he fed power to the space boat. But even as he caught a glimpse of the Station in the remote distance, the beam went dead. The girl had been following his actions closely. She understood what had happened. Don turned to her. "Your friends, right?"

She nodded. "It must be them. They homed on your beam too. They've taken over the Signal Point!"

"Of course," Don agreed, "That's exactly what they've done. They must have cut the switches accidentally. They certainly wouldn't want us to know that they made it. But it's too late now. We know where they are, at least and that's a lot of help."

"Is it?" Barbara demurred, "we can't do much with this little space boat, and we don't have any heavy weapons and there are at least three of them—maybe four."

"Before we start worrying," Don said purposefully, "let's get within range of the station." The space boat bucked its way toward the station. Don had no fear of detection. He knew how poor visibility was from the observation platform of the Signal Point.

He set down the little space ship about three hundred feet from the Signal Point well out of visual range even if the wind should sweep aside the storm momentarily.

"We'll leave the Iapetan diamonds here and take nothing with us except the weapons. I'll take your rifle. You take the pistol."

They traded weapons and after checking them and their space-suits, they squirmed through the little air lock into the Phoebean blizzard.

CAUTIOUSLY they found their way to the Signal Station. Don

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saw the dim outlines of a fairly large space ship on the opposite side. He felt the girl tap his shoulder. He looked to where she was pointing and he could see clearly the cause of the peculiar behavior of the radio apparatus a short while ago. In landing, the raiders had swooped so low that the exposed antennae were clipped from their positions.

Don proceeded to walk around the building to the air lock that led directly into the power house. He manipulated the combination lock and the door swung open. Barbara stepped in after him. The door closed.

Don flipped the light switch on the opposite side of the wall, located the other entry door. He and the girl waited a few minutes until the ammonia-ice melted from them. Don pressed the lever that cleared the lock wth a blast of air. Now they were ready to enter the Signal Point proper without danger of giving warning by allowing ammonia fumes to contaminate the air.

They went through the inner door and up the stairway which led to the control room.

He and the girl looked through the little glass window in the door opening on the radio room. They could see three men sitting at ease, talking animatedly among themselves. They seemed to be debating what to do. Quickly Don flipped open the door and stepped through. His eye-port was open and he could be heard.

"Stand up!" he commanded brusk ly.

"Up!" Don repeated and the loosely held rifle in his hand emphasized his command. The three men stood up. There was startled anger on their faces.

Barbara had removed her helmet and was standing beside him. Don took off his. None of the three said anything. They simply stood and glared.

"Back over to that wall," Don gestured.

By now the leader of the three had recovered his aplomb. He was smiling at Don.

"Listen to me," he said. "You won't have to worry about a thing if you'll make a sensible proposition. Now I—"

Don never knew what the proposition was. He felt something hard in his back and a cold calculating voice said calmly:

"Put down your gun."

Don glanced at Barbara. Her face was white. She was staring at the man behind Don. The three men against the wall grinned and started to come forward.

DON LET his weapon clatter to the floor. The calmness that had been Barbara's was gone. He could almost see her mind estimating the possibility of shooting down his assailant. She would succeed of course, but he, Don Manning, would die.

Resigned, Barbara dropped her gun.

The three men recovered their own weapons.

"That's better, a lot better," Black said as he straightened up. "Now we can talk like real friends. And we've got a lot to talk about. So let's start now."

"Leave her—" Don started to say.

"—Shut up!" Black said abruptly. "We want to do our talking to the girl."

He stepped over to her. "Listen," he said, "we can make everything pleasant for all of us. All we want is that packet of Iapetan diamonds. Nothing else. Produce them and we'll let you go."

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"And suppose I won't tell you where they are?" Barbara asked quietly.

Black's hand lashed out and slapped her hard across the cheek. The girl stepped back, and Black struck her twice more. She flinched under the blows but remained silent.

The four men were so interested in the girl and her refusal to talk that their eyes were not on Don. A half dozen feet away was the girl's pistol. Don knew that in a desperate effort he could reach it. But what was more important was the fact that their helmets were also lying on the floor. Barbara's was practically at her feet, while his lay only a step away.

Black was reasoning with her now.

"Be sensible," he was saying. "You want to live, don't you? All you have to do is tell us where you've put the jewels and we'll even take you back to Earth. If you don't talk we'll hunt around until we find them. And we will find them, you know that. So why don't you make it easier all the way around. You're young and you're beautiful. Why not stay alive?"

While the monologue went on, Don managed to catch her eye. Almost imperceptibly he nodded toward the space helmet on the floor. Then he glanced toward the quartzite ports along the wall. He had no idea if his meaning was being conveyed, but it was their only chance. They had to move fast.

Carefully Don estimated the distance and the time involved in his little scheme. He lunged forward and shouted at the top of his lungs: "Your helmet! Your *helmet!*"

Instantly he had scooped up his own and flipped it on his head. In the same breath, his right hand snatched the pistol from the floor. Even as he was bringing it up, the four men were almost on him. With a desperate effort, Don fired twice. Straight and true his bullets sped, smashing into the quartzite window ten feet away. The hard glass, tough and durable, shattered under the impact of the bullet. With a whish the ammonia and methane atmosphere flooded into the room.

Don's helmet was almost tight, but his nostrils caught the barest scent of the deadly gases.

Instantly the four men were down. There was no time for thought—it happened so fast. Don saw the men writhe briefly as the chemicals enveloped them. He saw the corrosive gases lick their flesh and in a matter of seconds they were dead, their flesh already beginning to assume the mottled hues of chemical decomposition.

Don raced to Barbara. Her helmet was safe on her head and she like he, was blowing the helmet free of any taint of noxiousness with the little increased pressure from her oxygen generator. But the sight of the men on the floor was too much for her. He could see her swaying on her feet. Then she fainted...

FOUR HOURS later, they were sitting opposite each other in the little room. Don had replaced the broken port, removed the bodies to the power room, and blown the place clean of the gases. They had left their trace though in all the corroded material of the apparatus.

"Well," Don said, "you're free now to take their ship and leave the Signal Station. You can probably pick up some sort of a patrol ship soon enough. I've got a lot of work to do now. I thought this was going to be a monotonous job. My hands will be full trying to get Signal Station One operating again."

"Yes," Barbara said, "I can see

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that. And I was the cause of it all. If I hadn't plunked my ship down right here, you wouldn't have a thing to worry about—not to mention my life." She was smiling, but there was sincerity in her voice, "I"m grateful," she said, "very grateful—and the least I can do is give you a hand here. Would you mind having my help you? I don't want to go into space alone again."

Don looked at her steadily and for a long while before he answered. His eyes gazed strongly into hers. "No," he said, after a time, "I'd like having you here to help me."

"I'll try," Barbara said simply. She reached across the table and touched his hand. There was great promise in her eyes and voice.

THE END

(*Concluded from page* 111

clawing at the gun in his belt.

Dirk dove forward and catapulted himself at Skarack's huge form. His iron-hard shoulder slammed into Skarack's middle with the force of a battering ram. Both men rolled to the ground, fists driving like pistons. Behind him Dirk heard the sounds of shouting, struggling men, but he had a battle on his own hands that needed his attention.

Skarack attempted to drive his knee into Dirk's groin, but missed as Dirk slammed his fist wrist-deep into the big man's belly. Dirk knew a merciless, grim joy as his rocky fists battered into Skarack's face and body.

His hands fastened into the big man's leather shirt like iron claws. Rising then, he jerked Skarack to his feet. The big man flailed wildly at him, but Dirk stepped under the blows and let his right drop in a vicious chopping stroke across the man's jaw.

His cold fury drove him on relentlessly. His heavy, powerfully packed shoulders swayed rhythmically as he exploded rights and lefts into Skarack's face and body. Blows that were as fast as the flick of a snake's tongue, and as savagely destructive as a trip-hammer.

Skarack staggered back and Dirk stepped in throwing all of his hatred and pent-up rage behind one ax-like blow that blasted into the big man's loosely hanging jaw. A dull *crack!* sounded. The noise might have been made by a thick branch snapping. But Dirk saw Skarack's queerly twisted position on the ground and knew it was no branch. The big man's twisted, red neck had made the noise.

Dirk twisted about, but he saw then that the fight was over. The prisoners had leaped on the guards when their attention had been distracted by the girl. They had soon finished things.

Dirk sprang then to the side of the girl and helped her to her feet. On her right palm he saw a red, sponge-like object.

"You were magnificent," he said simply. "I deserve a thrashing for even thinking you might have double-crossed us."

The girl smiled and held up the electric hypnotic pad with which she had put the two guards out of commission.

"The only way I could think of to get near enough to use this was to pretend to have changed my mind about everything. I stole this hypnotic pad from Skarack's office, hoping I'd get a chance to use it sometime. When I saw that he had discovered your plot I decided I'd never get a better opportunity to at least *try* to use it."

Vyers came up smiling.

"Everything's under control," he said happily. "Guards rounded up, Skarack out of the way—for good. When we get the supply of the hypnotic antidote we'll let the rest of the men loose."

"Perfect," Dirk said.

He looked down at the small fair head close to his shoulder. Then he put his arm around her shoulder.

"Perfect," she murmured.

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IS MISSING!

By Mack Reynolds

If you find a missing planet, let it alone. The reward will probably prove to be a one-way ticket to a psychiatric ward!

THE ASTRONOMER Royal, Sir Horace Peters, M. A., Sc. D., F. R. S., blinked his eyes in surprise and announced to his assistant, "Mars has disappeared."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

The other glared at him. "Confound it, Feathers, didn't you hear me? I said that Mars has completely disappeared."

His assistant looked at him apologetically, wondering inwardly what

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was getting into the old boy. "Yes, sir, I heard you. Undoubtedly it will be visible again in a moment."

The glare intensified and its effect was increased by the appearance of a red flush creeping up Sir Horace's neck. Before saying anything further, however, the astronomer turned again and applied his eye to his telescope. He stood motionless for a full five minutes before confronting the other once more.

"Hah," he snapped triumphantly. "Just as I said. Mars has disappeared."

Feathers was beginning to get alarmed. This was unprecedented and Feathers didn't like things to be unprecedented. That was why he'd chosen astronomy as a vocation; he couldn't think of anything in the way of a livelihood that would face him with fewer precedents than astronomy.

"Are you ill, sir?" he asked, solicitously.

"Confound it, Feathers, will you stop being so dense? I announce to you the most startling fact to confront the science of astronomy since Galileo—and what do you say? You ask me if I'm ill."

"I don't understand, sir," Feathers said desperately. "You said that Mars had disappeared and I said undoubtedly it would be visible again in a moment."

The Astronomer Royal attempted to control himself. His face was red now, but he said softly, "I didn't say the skies were darkened by clouds; I didn't even say that atmospheric tremors were bothering my observations." His voice began to go high. *"I said that Mars has disappeared,* and, by Jove, I mean that MARS HAS DISAPPEARED!"

His assistant stared at him for a long moment. Finally he laid down his pencil and said timidly, "But, Sir Horace, Mars can't disappear. There must be some mistake."

The other took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. "Yes, yes," he said, "I must control myself. There must be some error. Forgive me, Feathers."

"Certainly, sir." Feathers picked up his pencil and went back to his notes.

Sir Horace reapplied himself to his telescope for another full ten minutes. Finally he straightened and turned back to the other again.

He said deliberately, "Feathers, I am using a telescope with a power of seventy-five. We are at a most favorable opposition. It should appear to be approximately as large as the moon is when seen by the naked eye. The sky is clear; the atmosphere is unusually free of tremors tonight. I tell you again, Feathers, *Mars has disappeared.*"

Feathers groaned inwardly. It was weeks like this that made him sorry he'd ever chosen astronomy. It was bad enough, the mobs of laymen who beseiged the observatory these days and nights, hoping for some opportunity to view the rocket ship in which the three Americans had taken off in an attempt to circle Luna and return. Yes, that was bad enough, but now he had an obviously insane man on his hands.

"May I see, sir?" he said in what he hoped was a soothing tone. Weren't you supposed to humor a psychopathic case?

He bent down over the eye piece.

Finally he straightened again, his face pale. "By Gad, Sir Horace, you're right. Mars *has* disappeared!"

ON THE other side of the globe, General McCall ran both his hands through his hair wearily then

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stuck them in his pockets and slumped to a stool in dejection. He was the youngest general in the army but he felt very old now.

"It's them, all right," he said. "They're coming back. I wonder what the hell it was this time."

The sergeant at the radio looked up at him. "Sorry, sir; still can't raise them. Haven't been able to get a thing since they left the atmosphere yesterday."

"It doesn't make much difference," the general said. "Once they get a couple of hundred miles off Earth everything seems to go to pot; radio, radar, everything. Maybe they'll have some answer to it."

The lieutenant at the radar said, "They're perfectly clear now, sir. Can't be more than a hundred miles up. They're braking, undoubtedly; soon they'll be able to use their retractable wings."

"Thanks, Lieutenant. I think I'll go out to the field."

The general came to his feet again and walked wearily to the door of the concrete blockhouse. This was the sixth failure in the past two years. Well, at least they were seemingly all right this time; maybe the *Neptune XIII* could be made ready for another try in the next few months. If another tragedy had occurred, such as the explosion of the *Neptune XI*, he doubted that further appropriations would have been forthcoming. People were getting jittery about these attempts to reach Earth's satellite.

He could see, now, the braking jets, high above the desert. Everything would seem to be in order; Captain Maddigan, Lieutenant Coty and Sergeant Evers would be telling him about it within half an hour.

The rocket craft was obviously undamaged. It came sweeping down toward the runway, firing minor rocket blasts intermittently. Its landing gear descended, and suddenly it was on the ground and taxiing toward them, looking surprisingly like a conventional airplane rather than a craft meant for the exploration of space.

The general ran out with the others as the *Neptune XIII* came to a halt. He stood impatiently while waiting for the occupants to open the hatch.

Finally, it swung free and a head and shoulders emerged. The man's face was pale and there was deep strain to be observed in it.

"Well, Maddigan, what went wrong?" the General snapped, then with concern in his voice, "You're all okay, aren't you?"

Captain Bill Maddigan said, "Yes, sir, but..."

"Then come on down. Don't be ashamed of your failure," the general said gruffly; "we'll start all over again tomorrow. Sooner or later we'll lick this thing and..."

Maddigan shook his head. "Sir, we didn't fail, not exactly." While those below stared up at him, trying to assimilate that, he paused, then added. "Sir, we've made some discoveries so shaking that we demand a hearing before a representative group of American scientists."

GENERAL McCALL glowered at him. "Are you completely around the corner, Captain? Come down here at once! What do you mean—you *demand?*"

Captain Maddigan's face was pale but he tightened his jaws stubbornly. "No, sir. We're afraid we'll be confined to an insane asylum if we give our report to army authorities alone. We've decided to stay in the ship, seal ourselves in, until we're guaranteed a hearing before a competent group of physicists and astronomers."

A figure next to the general whispered. "Humor him, sir; obviously something's happened. They're proba-

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bly all out of their minds and not responsible."

The general shot a glance at the medical corp major. He ran a hand quickly through his hair. "You're undoubtedly right, Major Corcoran; you speak to them." His voice rose, to the scores of base personnel who'd surrounded the spacecraft. "All you other men clear out of here. Back to your quarters!"

The crowd scattered regretfully, all ranks from private to colonel, and as they went they gazed back over their shoulders, scowlingly, apprehensively. There was something definitely wrong here and everybody on the field knew it.

The doctor called up, "You'll be all right, Captain. Come on down, the three of you, and we'll take care..."

Two other heads made themselves visible next to Maddigan's. Lieutenant Mike Coty said, "You don't understand, Major. We're not crazy and we're not sick. We've just run into something that scares us and we're afraid that if you army medicos get your hands on us we'll wind up in a nut factory. We want some capable scientists to hear our story."

"That goes for me to," Sergeant Joe Evers gulped.

"Now see here, boys," the major began.

But it didn't do any good. They bolted the hatch again, threatening to take off and land in some remote spot from which they could escape, if attempts were made to get them out. They wanted some prominent scientists and nothing short of that.

"It's a matter of humoring them," the major told McCall in a low voice. "Flagstaff Observatory is only a few hundred miles and Los Alamos considerably nearer. We can have some physicists and astronomers here within hours."

General McCall snapped in irritation. "I'm getting to the point where I'm ready to blast them out."

"They're sick men, General," the major said softly. "Besides, the eyes of the world have been directed to the flight and not even army censorship could keep this from the papers. I suggest you handle the situation with care. Shall I give orders to assemble the specialists these men demand? That will, at least, give us the opportunity to get them out of there and—uh—get our hands on them."

"Go ahead," the general sighed.

THE HALF dozen physicists and astronomers from Los Alamos and Flagstaff were seated in the officer's mess. Major Corcoran summed up the situation briefly.

"As you know, gentlemen, the army made its sixth attempt to reach the moon the day before yesterday. Three men, Captain Maddigan, Lieutenant Coty and Sergeant Evers made up the crew of the rocket craft. I won't go into the details of the *Neptune XIII*, but definite improvements had been made over the earlier ships and we had high hopes of the success of this try.

"It was expected that the trip would take approximately nine days in all; fours days to reach Luna, one to circle it, and four to return.

"Upon its leaving the atmosphere of earth, we lost radio contact with the *Neptune XIII* and, shortly afterwards, radar contact. Evidently, there are some factors at work with which we are as yet unfamiliar. However, we still had reason for elation; everything seemed to be going successfully."

The doctor paused momentarily before going on. "You can imagine our surprise, gentlemen, when the *Neptune XIII* returned yesterday after having been gone less than twenty-four hours. It landed successfully, and, from all indications, ship and crew

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were quite in order."

Professor Bryant, the noted physicist, said impatiently, "My dear Major, I can't see what this all has to do with us. The experiment is all very interesting but—"

General McCall held up a hand. "Please, Professor, let the major proceed. We aren't any happier about this than you are."

The doctor went on. "As I say, the men seemed to be all right except for one thing—they refused to leave the ship until an audience of American scientists was present to hear their story."

Felix Baumer of Flagstaff shifted his position uncomfortably and knit his heavy eyebrows. "I seem to have missed something there. What story?"

"That's the mystery, gentlemen. Beyond claiming that they'd made some discoveries so shaking they were afraid they'd be placed in a mental institution, they refused to say anything; that is, until competent physicists and astronomers were assembled."

"Preposterous!" Professor Bryant snorted. "Obviously, these unfortunate men have snapped under the strain. I can see—"

"Professor, that is our own conclusion," General McCall said impatiently. "However, there is a good deal at stake. We seem to be on the verge of attaining to space travel, but the past five disastrous attempts have brought on considerable opposition. I am afraid a sixth—well, at any rate, we wish to give them every benefit of the doubt. Besides," he added with a grimace, "it was the only way we could get them out."

"Very well, General," one of the other physicists agreed, "where are they?"

McCall shot a glance at his wristwatch. "They should be here momentarily. Maddigan went to the library for some book or other which he wanted before speaking to you."

THE DOOR opened and a lieutenant-colonel entered followed by Captain Bill Maddigan, whose face was still pale and strained. Behind him, bearing a bulky tarpaulin-wrapped object, staggered Coty and Evers. The lieutenant-colonel stood aside and leaned against the door, while the three advanced until they faced the six experts, General McCall and Major Corcoran.

Bill Maddigan was obviously the spokesman; the other two stood behind him, near their burden and faced their audience half defiantly, half fearfully.

Major Corcoran made hasty introductions.

The captain of the *Neptune XIII* wet his lips carefully and said, "Gentlemen, I have no doubt that either General McCall or Major Corcoran has briefed you on the situation."

He attempted a wry grin, which looked nothing more than sickly. "I have no doubt, either, that they told you we were mentally upset and that this was an attempt to humor us and get us from our ship."

No one said anything. The major half lifted one hand as though in protest, but remained silent.

Maddigan went on, "Frankly, we're half inclined to agree with them. Hadn't it been for three or four books I'd read some years ago, undoubtedly our minds *would* have snapped."

He held up his right hand which held a heavy volume. "My being familiar with this work saved us."

The pilot turned and faced Felix Baumer. "I understand, sir, that you are a well known astronomer. Please tell me how far the moon is from the Earth."

Baumer's heavy eyebrows went up. "I should think you would be per-

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fectly familiar with that, Captain. It is approximately 239,000 miles away."

"How do you know?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"How do you know?" Maddigan repeated.

Felix Baumer looked from one to the other of his fellow scientists, raised his eyebrows again and said, "We compute the distance of heavenly bodies by use of triangulation. The moon, we have found, is 239,000 miles off."

"And the sun?"

"Roughly 93,000,000 miles."

"And Mars?"

"The planet Mars may be as near as 35,000,000 miles during a perihelion opposition; or it may be as far away as 63,000,000 miles at an aphelion opposition. Of course, when it isn't in opposition it is considerably further away than that."

"And how were these figures arrived at?" Maddigan went on.

General McCall interrupted. "Look here, Captain, you put our infant Space Service in a bad light. You are perfectly familiar with these things. The courses you've taken in preparation..."

For the first time, Lieutenant Mike Coty spoke up. "Sir," he said to General McCall, "that's why we wanted a group of scientists present when we made our report. Most of the courses we took are way off the beam."

"Way off," Sergeant Evers muttered.

Captain Maddigan said, "Please let me continue, sir."

The general snorted in disgust, but remained silent.

MADDIGAN OPENED his book at a page in which he'd been holding a finger. Before he read he looked up at the six specialists and said, "We use triangulation to determine the distance of heavenly bodies, but the method isn't even efficient for measuring things at comparatively short distances." His eyes went down to his volume and he continued. "According to the measurements made by Cook, the height of the mountain Mauna Loa is 18,410 feet; according to Marchand, it is 16,611 feet; according to Wilkes, it is only 13,761—all used the triangulation method."

He went on further. "In the 22-150 issue of the *Alpine Journal* there is a list of eight different measurements of the height of Mt. St. Elias. They vary from 12,672 to 19,500 feet—all used the triangulation method.

"An article in the *Scientific American* issue of 119-31 points out that there is always an error of at least ten percent in calculating the height of a mountain. The writer contends that Mt. Everest is somewhere between 26,100 and 31,900 feet."

Two or three of the assembled specialists began to protest; Felix Baumer even came to his feet.

Maddigan held up a hand. "Gentlemen, if we cannot measure accurately mountains right here on Earth by triangulation; how in the name of reason can we attempt to measure distances running into the millions of miles?"

Professor Bryant snapped. "Get to your point, young man. It would be very easy at this point for us simply to say, 'Do you think you can do better?' but obviously you are building up to some point you wish to make."

Captain Maddigan turned to him. "Yes, sir," he said, "my point is that our attempt to reach the moon the day before yesterday wasn't a failure."

General McCall gaped at him, then sputtered, "You were back in less that twenty-four hours. Are you—"

Bill Maddigan said wearily, "Gentlemen, the moon is considerably less

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in size than we have assumed and it is *less than four thousand miles away.*"

There was a long awkward silence. Maddigan took a step backward toward Coty and Evers as though seeking their support.

Finally, Major Corcoran said soothingly, "Then Captain, you claim that you actually circled the moon, in the short time you were gone, and returned?"

"Yes, sir. And while I'm at it, I might as well tell you that the sun isn't any ninety-three million miles away either. It's closer than that and not nearly so big as—"

Lieutenant Coty said tightly, "Give them the rest of it, Bill."

Professor Bryant snorted, "You mean there can be more?"

Bill Maddigan hurried on. "Yes, sir, there is more. All evidence in space indicates that we have been wrong is supposing that the earth circles the sun. Actually we're almost stationary. The sun, carrying Venus and Mercury with it, revolves at a distance of only a few tens of thousands of miles. The exterior planets which are, gentlemen, considerably smaller than we have thought, not only revolve about this central arrangement but approach and recede from us in loops."

THEY SAT staring at him, some in sympathy, some in disgust. Two essayed chuckles.

"I might as well wind it up," Maddigan concluded. "The earth isn't round, either; it's more top-shaped than spherical."

Major Corcoran laughed sympathetically. "Well, Captain, I think we should be off now. You wanted your story to be heard by a group of scientists and we gathered them for you. Now it will probably be best if we go on over to the hospital and make arrangements..."

"Wait a minute," Lieutenant Coty said. He turned to the six specialists, holding up one hand as though in supplication. "We knew we wouldn't have a chance with the army medicos, but we thought you'd be interested enough to at least check some of..."

Felix Baumer said, not without kindliness in his tone, "I am sorry, Lieutenant. We all sympathize with you deeply. I am sure that a very short stay in proper institutions will have you on your feet again."

The others nodded.

The lieutenant-colonel who had conducted the three spacemen to the meeting, got up from his chair and stuck his head out the door and called. Half a dozen medical corp men began to enter.

Sergeant Evers said desperately. "How about our proof, Captain?"

Captain Maddigan held up his hand. "One more thing," he said. "We were afraid of this so we brought something in the way of evidence."

"Possibly a piece of green cheese from the moon?" someone said.

The six medics continued to advance.

"Show 'em boys," Maddigan told Coty and Evers.

The lieutenant and the sergeant tore the tarpaulin from the bulky object they'd brought with them.

General McCall said, bitterness in his voice, "What the hell is that supposed to be?"

They all stared at the slightly luminous sphere.

"Why, why," Felix Baumer said, "it looks like a model of Mars."

Maddigan said hurriedly—the medics were almost to him—"When we got to Luna so quickly and saw some of the ramifications of these discoveries we've made, we knew we'd have to go on, to secure evidence. This is it, gentlemen."

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McCall said, "What in the hell are you talking about?"

The medics had him by the arms now. Maddigan blurted, "We went over and picked up Mars and brought it back!" They began dragging him and the struggling Coty and Evers from the room.

"It's true," Evers yelled desperately. "It's Mars. That's the planet Mars!"

"Read the book," Maddigan shrilled, "the evidence is in the book!"

After the door was closed behind them, General McCall slumped back into his chair dejectedly. "This is the end," he muttered. "After this, there won't be another appropriation for the Space Service for *years!*"

Felix Baumer said idly, "You know, it's quite a coincidence. Something unexplained *has* happened to Mars. We haven't been able to pick it up at all in our telescopes at the observatory these past few nights." He yawned and shrugged. "Science is slow to arrive at conclusions; sometimes it takes generations to discover the why and wherefore of such things."

Professor Bryant went over and picked up the book from which Maddigan had been reading.

"The Books of Charles Fort," he snorted. "No wonder the poor fellows went mad, reading the works of that crackpot."

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knew your onions—and your *hargaberries* and your *keoloos*—"

He stuck out his hand and Jimmy took it, his eyes shining. "Thanks, dad. We'll be able to supply you all the *keoloo*-rubber you want."

"What I want to know," said Fahenstock, "is how you knew the tree—"

"—was going to fall? I planned it. It was touch and go from the first. On the regular *keoloo* plantations, you leave the gate in one side of the tree for an hour, then put it in the other side. Or you use two gates. But if you leave the gate in one side too long, it means that you're draining the growth hormone auxin from one side of the tree only. Keolo-latex is one half auxin. So one side of the tree grows more than the other, and it begins to curve. . . . the keoloo grows fast. It fell. And it fell across the cabin because I walked directly away from the cabin and inserted the gate!

"It isn't a new principle," Jimmy said earnestly. "Auxin was discovered in the early twentieth century by Boynsen, Jensen, Paál, Thimann, and a bunch of others, and they got much the same effect I did, only on a smaller scale."

Dorothy captured Jimmy after that and dragged him to a secluded spot, touching his stubbled face. Her eyes shone. "Jimmy," she whispered, "can we build a house—right here? When we're married?"

Jimmy took off his glasses. He always felt braver when his eyes were a little blurred. "What do you mean *when?*" he demanded. "Wait till the captain of that police cruiser gets here. With your father's blessing, we'll be man and wife before we leave this planet!"

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(*Concluded from page* 83)

At two o'clock it sighted her, made contact, transferred the Senator, and submerged again.

In less than half an hour the Senator was in a jet plane, streaking home, for the first time in twenty-seven years, leaving the country the same way he had entered it.

And fifteen minutes after that, the Air Force located the carrier and sunk it; but it was too late, of course.

THE SENATOR was taken into polite custody at the airport.

His native language came unfamiliarly to his tongue, but he could understand enough to know that he was to be taken directly to the head of operations. "You will communicate with no one," the military office concluded.

The head of operations was Dr. Prokoff. He was seated behind a huge desk with a bare, shiny top. He looked the Senator over very carefully.

"Do be seated," he said.

The Senator sank wearily into the chair

"I am sorry you were wounded," Dr. Prokoff said, almost indifferently.

Dr. Prokoff motioned to the guards to leave. The two men were alone in the office.

"I interview all incoming persons," he explained. "It is necessary, of course, as you can understand. I am familiar with America from long study and it is my job to evaluate your information. Not infrequently, we have picked up, not our own messengers, but spies for America, who bring us false information. That we cannot tolerate."

"I see," the Senator answered dryly, his language still sounding strange to his tongue.

The Senator studied the man's face; it was a friendly, open, pleasant face.

"You have my fingerprints on file under the number 309," he said.

"Quite," Dr. Prokoff answered, "I have checked that. And I have no doubt as to your authenticity."

"Excellent."

"Now. I would hear your information. Information that is important enough to make you give up an invaluable position."

"This is that important."

Dr. Prokoff frowned. "One moment, please." He arose, walked to a picture on the wall, reached behind it and switched off a tiny microphone.

"Have a cigarette," he said.

"I would prefer a cigar."

"I'm sorry, but I don't keep them."

The Senator shrugged; he lit one of the cigarettes. It was bitter tasting.

"Now," said Dr. Prokoff, "may I hear your information?"

The Senator told him, talking rapidly, his eyes aglow with emotion.

When he had finished, Dr. Prokoff leaned forward and whispered: "How many others know this?"

"None," the Senator said. "I believe the Americans have broken up the spy cell of which I was a member. To the best of my knowledge, you and I are the only Party members who know."

Dr. Prokoff smiled a friendly smile. "Good," he said. "I have something I want to show you."

He reached in his upper right hand drawer and withdrew a large service pistol. He aimed it squarely at the Senator's forehead.

He smiled. "Goodby, Comrade Strobovk," he said. And he spoke in his native language; it came strangely to his tongue, too.

"You damned American!" the Senator snarled, just before Dr. Prokoff shot him between the eyes.

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